

**THE THEATRE OF TRANSCENDENCE:
PATRICK WHITE'S LAST FOUR NOVELS**

by

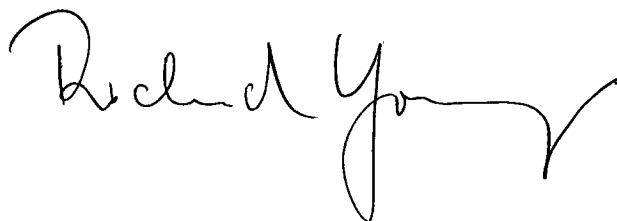
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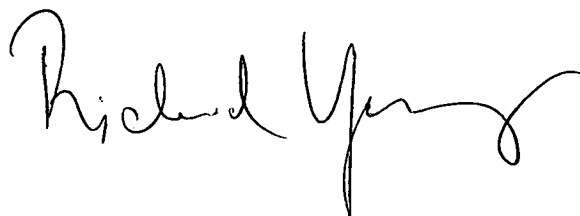
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Abstract

White's fiction is a writing under pressure from the twin claims of being and becoming. In his earlier novels, for example *The Tree of Man*, the essential and absolute structures of being emerge as the ultimate ground of existence. White was always concerned with the flow of existence, and in particular, with the question of identity. The question White particularly wrestles with is whether identity is reducible to the unchanging forms of being, or whether it is given over to the flux of existence. White's project became, in part, an attempt to find a trope which would contain, without reconciling, the dual claims of being and becoming.

In his last four novels, *The Eye of the Storm*, *A Fringe of Leaves*, *The Twyborn Affair*, and *Memoirs of Many in One*, the theatrical emerges as a structure which contains within its form both being and becoming. The theatrical presents a structure which consists of an enclosing form in which an action—a becoming—unfolds. The enclosing form appropriates being to its structure, while the action appropriates becoming. The theatrical thus operates as a metaphor of the reconciliation of the absolute and the contingent. It is the theatrical, emerging ever more clearly in White's last four novels, which determines the ultimately ungrounded quality which they exhibit, and which denies any seeing of the ultimate.

The theatrical elements do not reflect any falling away of White's powers as a writer, on the contrary, they signal a solution to the problem which he wrestled with throughout his career: of holding together within a fictional structure the antithetical claims of being and becoming. This shifts White's fiction away from the modernist attempt to lay hold of the ultimate and unchanging, and towards those concerns with existence as such which might be characterised as post-modernist. In order to justify this view of White's fiction, those philosophers who have contested the notion that mind and language can reach the absolute—in particular Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Derrida—will be appealed to.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In *The Vivisector* (1970) the protagonist Hurtle Duffield and his erstwhile lover Hero Pavloussi are visiting the Greek islands. They sit in a cafe drinking coffee as they wait for the ferry to take them back to the mainland.

Forgetting she had finished it, she took a mouthful of her coffee, and now had to spit out the muddy dregs; however he remembered Hero, and there was still the return voyage to Piraeus, this might remain the key version: the black lips spluttering and gasping; the terrible tunnel of her black mouth.

'Dreck! Dreck! The Germans express it best. Well, I will learn to live with such Dreck as I am: to find a reason and purpose in this Dreck.'

All this time a little golden hen had been stalking and clucking round the iron base of the café table, pecking at the crumbs which had fallen from their mouths. The warm scallops of her golden feathers were of that same inspiration as the scales of the great silver-blue sea creature they – or he, at least – had watched from John of the Apocalypse, ritually coiling and uncoiling, before dissolving in the last light.

'See – Hero?' he began to croak, while pointing with his ineffectual finger. 'This hen!' he croaked.

Hero half-directed her attention at the hen; but what he could visualise and apprehend, he could really only convey in paint, and then not for Hero. The distressing part was: they were barking up the same tree.

Their lack of empathy was not put to more severe tests because the proprietor came to the table. As he wiped the marble surface, he made some confidential remark in the language the ex-lover found he still resented.

'*Alitheia*?' Hero replied, craning.

'He says,' she explained, 'the *vaporaki* has been sighted from the mole. . .

The golden hen flashed her wings: not in flight; she remained consecrated to this earth even while scurrying through illuminated dust.¹

What is it that Hurtle sees, that could only really be conveyed in paint? This scene looks forward to Elizabeth Hunter's experience in the eye of the cyclone, in relation to which we are told, that: "You can never convey in words the utmost in experience." Hurtle's experience is one which might suggest an apprehension of the "utmost." However, I want to argue that it involves a seeing under the aspect of existence rather than

¹ Patrick White, *The Vivisector* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 393-393. All subsequent page references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

sub specie aeternitatis. This latter suggests some kind of transcendental vision which, in turn, would involve a detached viewpoint, whereas if this scene is considered in the light of a line of philosophical thought extending from Kierkegaard through Nietzsche to Wittgenstein, Heidegger and most recently, Derrida, it suggests an existential predicament rather than a spectacle. There is a sense that the characters are immersed in the situation and are unable to get outside of it in order to see completely. This immersion or embeddedness is a characteristic of existence. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard writes that:

As an existing person, he can least of all hold absolutely fast the annulment of the dialectical element (existence); for that there is required a medium other than existence, which is indeed precisely the dialectical element.²

For Kierkegaard this condition of embeddedness denies the availability of the absolute. It leads to the apprehension of a process rather than the ultimate, a becoming rather than a being or thing-in-itself, and such: "Movements, becomings . . . are below and above the threshold of perception."³

Martin Heidegger wrote that "all Being is for Nietzsche a Becoming."⁴ It is this identity which is seen in the passage from *The Vivisector*, and it is this which White writes in his last four novels: *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), and *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986). Absolute being appears, but only as becoming appears *as* being.⁵ In other words, what seems to be the absolute is the contingent assuming the role of the absolute. Being is thus ungrounded and is realised as theatre. The scene involving Hero and Hurtle is not concerned with the ultimate; it enacts a theatre of the transcendent wherein metaphysical categories are denied. This theatre has to do with the ungrounded play of being and becoming in an identity which gives rise to the appearance of the contingent *as* ostensibly absolute

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans., Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1993), 315. All subsequent references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text as C.U.P. followed by the page number.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 381.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), I, 7.

⁵ Heidegger distinguishes between "Being," which refers to existence—to the infinitive form of the verb "to be," and "being", which refers to particular entities. Throughout my thesis I will follow Heidegger's distinction.

categories such as, appearance and reality, and the mundane and the transcendent. Two strands of thought, one belonging to Wittgenstein, and the other to Heidegger, can offer assistance in seeing how this particular passage from *The Vivisector* signals the beginning of a change in White's fiction away from the modernist quest to make "literature a form of visual presence,"⁶ thus, achieving a direct seeing into the heart of reality, towards an attempt to delineate the ungrounded structure of existence itself. White can be seen as a writer whose fiction moves in new directions in the novels after *The Vivisector* towards those concerns which can be characterised as post-modern. Because it brings existence, or Being into focus rather than the absolute, this scene from *The Vivisector* invites a consideration of the ideas of the philosopher of Being, Martin Heidegger.

In addition, Hurtle Duffield, rather than having some kind of vision of the thing-in-itself, sees the hen *as* the absolute, and in order to understand this distinction the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein claim our attention. It is not my intention to discuss the ideas of these, or any other philosophers, beyond that which is necessary in using them to develop an approach to White's fiction.⁷ I wish to draw certain analogies between their philosophy and White's last four novels. I enter into this enterprise in the spirit of Richard Rorty by "conscientiously blurring the literature-philosophy distinction."⁸ The line I take is one way of seeing his late novels, one more of what Wittgenstein called "reminders for a particular purpose."⁹ My particular purpose is to suggest that White in his last novels is focusing to a significant degree on the question of existence as existence. His writing operates less and less within a metaphysical frame in which unities and dualities may be seen, and more and more within a frame which is rhetorical rather than absolute and which I characterise as

⁶ Allen Thiher, *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 1984, 1.

⁷ White's studies in German at Cambridge may well have brought him into contact with German philosophy of the first half of the Twentieth Century. He read Nietzsche as an undergraduate, albeit "without being drawn to it" (Patrick White, *Letters*, [Sydney: Random House, 1994] ed. David Marr, 139), although Ann McCulloch suggests that his "works might very well have been influenced by a Nietzschean view of the world" (A. M. McCulloch, *A Tragic Vision: The Novels of Patrick White* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), 3.

⁸ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 86.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), sec. 127. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text as *P.I.* followed by the section number, except for references to Part Two which are given by page number.

theatrical.

My approach to the theatrical will be explained in more detail later, but at this point I will state that the theatrical contains within a rhetorical structure the relationship, or identity, of being and becoming, and this presents us, especially in the final four novels, with an existential continuum which qualifies the oft-asserted presence of metaphysical dichotomies and unities in White's work. In these novels being is seen as stasis, while becoming involves movement and change. My use of the term "theatrical" is special in that it does not rest on the split between appearance and reality which lies behind the usual meaning of this word. This split in turn derives from a subject-object dichotomy in that the categories "appearance" and "reality" can be seen as aspects of perception. Nietzsche attacked the contrast between appearance and reality on the ground "that the distinction is simply a projection onto the external world of our belief that the self is a substance, somehow set over and above its thoughts, desires, and actions."¹⁰ Thus in my use of this term the theatrical does not underwrite any attempt to plumb metaphysical depths and to arrive at some essential realm of significance whether immanent or transcendent. The contingent—"thoughts, desires, and actions"—is what is "ultimately" real.

It is these which are significant in the scene with the painter, along with the total seeing situation of which Hurtle is a part. His seeing is linked to the word "*Alitheia*" used by Hero in reply to the proprietor. The Greek word *Alitheia* or *Aletheia* is usually translated as "truth." However, it has the particular meaning of "'what is revealed'; 'what is brought out from concealment'."¹¹ In this scene the word points substantially to Hurtle's incommunicable insight triggered by the golden hen. He sees the hen as other than a mere animal and his seeing is tied to the total situation that surrounds his vision, which includes what Hurtle himself is; a painter. In fact, what is seen has a painterly quality. The phrase—"the warm scallops of her golden feathers were of that same inspiration as the scales of the great silver-blue sea creature"—for example, shows that his insight arises out of, or from within, a particular mode of existence, that of

¹⁰ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 1985), 171.

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 370.

a visual artist. This is, in fact, how White saw his writing. He wrote that he was: "Always something of a frustrated painter, and a composer *manqué*, I wanted to give my book [*Voss*] the textures of music, the sensuousness of paint."¹² Painting offers a kind of seeing that is akin to that which Duffield experiences here.

The situation in this episode is analogous to the concept of truth adopted by Martin Heidegger. He writes in *Being and Time* (1926) that:

To say that an assertion "*is true*" signifies that it uncovers the entity as it is in itself. Such an assertion asserts, points out, 'lets' the entity 'be seen'... in its uncoveredness. The *Being-true (truth)* of the assertion must be understood as *Being-uncovering*. Thus truth has by no means the structure of an agreement between knowing and the object in the sense of a likening of one entity (the subject) to another (the Object).¹³

Truth as Being-uncovering is thus not an absolute but a function of existence. What can be seen in the passage from *The Vivisector* is a Being-uncovering, having as its locus a mode of existence within an extended situation. (It is important to note that the term "Being-uncovering" is transitive rather than substantive. The translators of *Being and Time* suggest that "to-be-uncovering" is more accurate [261 n.]. Therefore a being, or entity, is not revealed, instead a process is delineated.) Duffield's insight is incommunicable, not because it involves any transcendental vision, but because the structure of unconcealment does not involve subject/object agreement, which lies behind the ability to communicate, and because his mode of Being as a painter does not lend itself to verbal communication. Being-uncovering is a function of existence; of particular modes of Being. Truth, according to Heidegger's analysis, is not any absolute ground, but is conditioned by existence itself, it "is a characteristic of Dasein, and as such does not exist independent of it."¹⁴ The word "Dasein" means "being-there" and it refers to that existential condition which lies before particular subjectivities. Michael Gelven explains this term as being "that entity which is capable of inquiring into its own being" (23). Heidegger writes that:

¹² Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son,' *Patrick White: Selected Writings*, ed. Alan Lawson (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994), 370.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 261. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

¹⁴ Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 131.

Self and world belong together in the single entity Dasein. Self and world are not two beings, like subject and object; . . . self and world are the basic determination of Dasein in the unity of the structure of being-in-the-world.¹⁵

Duffield's is a compound situation, suggested by the Heideggerean compound term Being-in-the-world which can be used to describe it.

This offers an alternative to that which obtains in other models of truth such as the correspondence theory where truth subsists in an agreement between two separate entities, the subject and the object. Heidegger's notion of Dasein was developed to overcome the problems which arise out of this dichotomy. According to Heidegger the division of reality into subject and object is only a derivative mode of Being. More fundamental is the "*unitary phenomenon*" (*Being and Time*, 78) which he characterises with the compound term Being-in-the-world. There is no separate entity called a subject since we are always already in a world. Thus the moment of revelation, or unconcealment, which Duffield experiences can be seen as an expression of his mode of Being-in-the-world and does not represent an insight into any metaphysical realm of essence. His is the experiencing of an uncovering, rather than the perception of an entity. It is his mode of Being as a painter which allows him to see the hen under the aspect that he does. His seeing is thus expressive rather than indicative. Hero is not privy to his vision, not because she belongs to a different class, the uninitiated, but because her mode of Being is different—she "only understood the visions of her own inferno" (390). It is Being-in-the-world, or existence, which is foregrounded here, and this is not a metaphysical unity as an absolute underlying reality beyond the world of appearance. This condition of Being-in produces an inability to see the absolute or the thing-in-itself. Seeing becomes seeing-*as* since the ground of seeing is, in existence, the shifting contextual scenes of life itself.

Hurtle Duffield's is thus not a seeing of the thing-in-itself, but the seeing of an aspect, a seeing-*as*. It is this type of seeing that particularly belongs to painting. The difference between seeing and seeing-*as* is elaborated by Wittgenstein in his analysis of the word "see." He writes:

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 297.

Two uses of the word 'see'.

The one: 'What do you see there?'—'I see *this*' (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: 'I see a likeness between these two faces'—let the man I tell this to be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself (*P.I.* 193).

Wittgenstein is interested in the phenomenon of seeing something *as* something. It is the type of seeing which occurs during a change of aspect, as when we view an ambiguous figure which we can see as one thing or another, or when we detect a likeness between separate objects. In other words, when we do not see a thing-in-itself, or the thingness of a thing. This is not, however, how we most often see, as he says:

It would have made as little sense for me to say "Now I am seeing it as . . ." as to say at the sight of a knife and fork "Now I am seeing this as a knife and fork" (*P.I.* 195).

Seeing-as is not a typical but is a special kind of seeing, and it is a seeing in which the object of sight is not an entity, but something akin to a process. We would not normally see a biro, for example, as anything other than a biro. However if we were playing a game with a child we might well see it as, say, an aeroplane, or a boat. The "meaning" of this object is not here connected to its intrinsic qualities, but to the total *situation* in which the object is used. The meaning is thus extended and relates to a kind of theatre in which a particular role is assigned according to its place within a scenic continuum. The attempt to represent this kind of seeing signals a concern to lay hold of the ungrounded flow of existence itself.

It is difficult to express (indeed Wittgenstein found it so) just what is seen in the phenomenon of seeing-as, however, the essence of seeing something *as* something has to do, not with the nature of any entity, but with what changes when we see something under a new aspect. In other words, with a movement or flow—with what goes on between and around things. Wittgenstein writes, in reference to ambiguous drawings:

And above all do *not* say "After all my visual impression isn't the *drawing*; it is *this*—which I can't shew to anyone."—Of course it is not the drawing, but neither is it anything of the same category, which I carry within myself (*P.I.* 196).

Wittgenstein rejects recourse to private mental objects since "the concept of the 'inner picture' is misleading, for this concept uses the '*outer* picture' as a model" (*P.I.* 196). The "object" of sight in this kind of situation cannot

be grounded in either the world or the mind. We see here a situation which recalls Derrida's suggestion that any pure, original stratum of experience is denied, since in existence

the possibility of constituting ideal objects belongs to the essence of consciousness, and since these ideal objects are historical products, only appearing thanks to acts of creation or intending, the element of consciousness and the element of language will be more and more difficult to discern. Will not their indiscernibility introduce nonpresence and difference (mediation, signs, referral back, etc.) in the heart of self-presence?¹⁶

"Ideal objects," inasmuch as they are "historical products," exist in extension across the total seeing situation. Thus Wittgenstein writes that the phenomenon of seeing-as involves a contradiction since: "The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged" (P.I. 196). This contradiction is the tension between becoming—"a *new* perception"—and being—the "unchanged." Thus Duffield's hen "remained consecrated to this earth even while scurrying through illuminated dust."

For Wittgenstein, in the case of seeing something under a new aspect, neither the thing itself changes nor does any mental picture which the viewer carries within. Ray Monk, in his biography of Wittgenstein, writes that the philosopher "was also emphatic that the question to ask about changes of aspect was not: 'What changes?' but 'What *difference* does the change make?'"¹⁷ The locus of meaning lies in extension *around* rather than *in* the signifying moment. The important thing about Wittgenstein's analysis of the word "see" has to do with the difference in the two "objects" of sight in seeing something, and seeing something *as* something. In the case of the latter a movement occurs, a movement which may be characterised as a change from one state of Being to another, or rather, a modulation in the flow of existence. This change does not involve either an alteration in reality nor an alteration in perception—the mental image. In other words, no metaphysical change occurs. No ground, either real or mental is involved, and no dualities of

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 15. Derrida here, in his critique of Husserlian time consciousness, takes up Heidegger's idea that being and temporality are reconciled in the notion of presence. Derrida's argument that the present is always ruptured by the absent, and that this pushes the static mode of being into the dynamic mode of becoming, is apposite to the line of argument I am pursuing.

¹⁷ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage Press, 1991), 515.

mind and world or reality and appearance arise. There is no underlying structure, rather that which is affected is the groundless flow of existence itself. Seeing-*as* thus points to the existential process of life rather than to metaphysically based entities. It is this process which is articulated in the scene from *The Vivisector*.

The Wittgensteinian analysis of the word "see" and the Heideggerean idea of truth as unconcealment are both, in my opinion, related, and each illuminates White's fictional presentation of existence. Seeing something *as* something does not involve any change to either a subject or an object; it involves, rather, a total shift in what Wittgenstein called a form of life. He wrote that: "What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*" (*P.I.* 226). The "given" is thus extended in time and space. This notion bears some similarity to Heidegger's idea of Being-in-the-world as the irreducible ungrounded ground of existence. Seeing something *as* something involves connections and contexts. It is not the metaphysical apprehension of the essence of the thing-in-itself, but the apprehension of the thing-in-context; as defined, not by intrinsic characteristics, but by that which surrounds it. Thus meaning spreads beyond the confines of reductionary forms and has a scenic locus. Meaning, in being spread, is thus *performed*, and moves into the dramatic mode. Therefore, the location and confinement of this scenic spread of meaning is accomplished as a kind of theatre. It is this mode which emerges more and more clearly in White's final four novels, and which uncovers a compelling strand in his fiction in which the relationship in identity of being and becoming is paramount rather than any metaphysical project.

Commentators on White have tended to see in his work a metaphysical division into dualities of various kinds: dualities which are related in various ways to an idea of unity. John Colmer sees White's "master theme in all his fiction" as being concerned with the achievement of "unity through the acceptance of duality." While: "His is a dualistic universe . . . his main aim is to assert the unity of all things."¹⁸ Laurence Steven argues that:

The result of his wanting to locate wholeness beyond the world we live in, is

¹⁸ John Colmer, 'The Quest Motif in Patrick White', *Review of National Literatures*, 11, (1983), 300-301.

an overt devaluing of human life. White forces a split between the transcendent realm of significance to which his visionaries gain occasional access, and the banal, quotidian actuality in which we live our alienated lives. This 'gap' leads to the dualisms which are everywhere apparent in White.¹⁹

Patricia Morley says that "White's thematic unity exhibits that paradox of permanence and change which he is continually exploring in his work."²⁰ Veronica Brady finds that White's "peculiar strength" is "his ability, despite everything, to combine contradictory images and experiences into a kind of unity."²¹ Alan Lawson suggests that, while White's fiction is concerned with resolving the dualities of life into harmonies, his novels contain a dichotomy between

two opposed modes. On the one hand, they attempt to reflect White's conviction that life is lived as flux . . . On the other hand, they clearly embody the belief, provisionally expressed by Eden Standish, that 'perhaps the most important things only happened in a flash.'²²

Standish's is a view re-affirmed by Theodora Goodman in *The Aunt's Story* (1948) when she reflects that: "The most one can expect from the led life is for it to be lit occasionally by a flash of wonder, which does not bear questioning, it is its own light."²³

In all of these views is suggested a split in reality between the fixed forms of being and the changing flow of becoming; a split that is grounded on a metaphysical absolute or unity. However, according to Carolyn Bliss:

Vision in White's early fiction . . . conveys a sense of unity and wholeness, the integration of the many in the context of the One. This fundamental tenet of the Whitean metaphysic is retained in his fiction; but in the subsequent four novels [*Voss*, *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Solid Mandala*, and *The Vivisector* in Bliss's article], the emphasis shifts to the states and experiences that enable vision.²⁴

¹⁹ Laurence Steven, *Dissociation and Wholeness in Patrick White's Fiction* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), 1.

²⁰ Patricia Morley, 'Patrick White: World of Semblance, World of Dream,' *St. Mark's Review* (June, 1976), 30.

²¹ Veronica Brady, "A Single Bone-Clean Button": The Achievement of Patrick White,' *The Literary Criterion*, 15, 3-4 (1980), 41.

²² Alan Lawson, 'Meaning and Experience: A Review-Essay on Some Recurrent Problems in Patrick White Criticism,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 31, 3 (Summer, 1979), 391-393.

²³ Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 179.

²⁴ Carolyn Bliss, 'Patrick White,' *International Literature in English: Essays on the Major Writers*, ed., Robert L. Ross (Chicago and London: St. James Press, 1991), 514.

Bliss discerns a movement away from the metaphysical and towards the existential in the novels published between 1957 and 1970, albeit still contained within the overall "Whitean metaphysic." As she suggests, there is a greater emphasis on the how rather than the what of vision. I would argue, however, that this emphasis leads to a movement away from a metaphysical view of reality to one in which an ungrounded view of existence is suggested. My contention is that this metaphysic is undermined in the last four novels by the non-metaphysical trope of the theatrical in such a way as to change the character of White's fiction.

One of the most recurrent of the dualisms suggested by the critics quoted earlier is that between character and consciousness; the outer and the inner self. W. D. Ashcroft writes that "Patrick White is pre-eminently a novelist of consciousness."²⁵ Gordon Collier claims that other critics err by adopting a view in which "characters are connected with the spiritual/metaphysical and the social, rather than states of consciousness being seen in their relation to *materia*."²⁶ Vijay Mishra attempting to "more adequately represent Leonie Kramer's argument" that, in respect of *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), "man is the measure of all things,"²⁷ asserts that:

The Patrick White novel is constructed as the entirety of a single consciousness which absorbs other consciousnesses as objects; not as the entirety of the interaction of several consciousnesses, of which no one fully becomes the object of any other one.²⁸

Underlying metaphysical forms can be detected in the terms of description employed here: for example, implicit in these views is some notion that "consciousness" is relatively fixed. In this it is analogous to being, as that which inheres as a stable core. "Character:" that which is elaborated in extension, can be seen as analogous to becoming. There is thus an implied relationship between these two here. Apart from the difficulties attendant on the use of the term "consciousness"—philosophers to this day are unable to agree on a meaning for this term—Wittgenstein's notion that: "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward

²⁵ W. D. Ashcroft, 'More Than One Horizon,' *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium* (Adelaide, Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978) eds., R. Shepherd and K. Singh, 134.

²⁶ Gordon Collier, *The Rocks and Sticks of Words : Style, Discourse and Narrative Structure in the Fiction of Patrick White* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1993), 430.

²⁷ Leonie Kramer, 'Patrick White's Götterdämmerung,' *Quadrant*, 83 (May-June, 1973), 15.

²⁸ Vijay Mishra, 'White's Poetics: Patrick White through Mikhail Bakhtin,' *Span*, 18 (April, 1984), 70-71.

criteria" (*P.I.* sec. 580) needs to be borne in mind. In other words, "consciousness" as "inner process" needs "outward criteria," one being, amongst other things, what we call "character." The inner stage must be transformed into an acceptable outer stage. It must be expressed rather than indicated. There must be a resolution of "being" within "becoming" in some ungrounded form, such as the theatrical. It is not a simple matter, therefore, to assert the primacy of consciousness.

White characterises the elaboration of his own inner selves—his "consciousness"—as a theatrical process. In *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) he refers to himself as a frustrated artist "of the theatre,"²⁹ and he tells us that "I chose fiction, or more likely it was chosen for me, as a means of introducing to a disbelieving audience the cast of contradictory characters of which I am composed" (20). David Marr, in his biography of White, underscores this point when he characterises the latter's fiction as a search for wholeness since "he always saw himself as a shattered personality – not one man but a cast of characters."³⁰ This is the idea of "the 'many in one', a theme prominent from *The Living and the Dead* on."³¹ This leads to the idea that "White increasingly insists that the self is not unitary but multiple,"³² and to the idea that his fiction embodies "the principle of universal cross-identity."³³ It is in the last four novels that both the theatrical elements and this multiplicity of self is most obvious. Although theatrical elements are apparent in his novels prior to the last four, the theatrical emerges in these latter novels as significant in ways that take it beyond the more usual meanings of the word. A point I would like to emphasise is that White's consciousness of a multiplicity of self is expressive of a mode of Being, rather than indicative of a particular state of being. The theatrical is a mode of expression, or un-concealment, rather than indication. White's writing can be seen as expressive, as the elaboration of a theatre of the self. In this it can be characterised, not as "something that has happened and is being recollected and recorded, but the *way* something happens, that is, the process itself as part of the final

²⁹ Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 19.

³⁰ David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Sydney, Vintage, 1993), 453.

³¹ Manly Johnson, 'Patrick White: "Failure" as Ontology,' *Journal of Popular Culture*, 33, 3 (1989), 79.

³² Veronica Brady, 'Making Things Appear: Patrick White and the Politics of Modernism,' *Island*, 53 (Spring, 1993), 37.

³³ Manly Johnson, 'Twyborn: the Abbess, the Bulbul, and the Bawdy House,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, 37, 1 (Spring, 1981), 165.

product."³⁴ This process culminates in the final novel, *Memoirs of Many in One* where White appears in the text as Patrick, the editor of Alex Gray's memoirs.

The question of identity is thus a central concern of White's. The theatrical is connected to the question of identity since through it identity moves away from the metaphysical—identity as *unity*—and towards the ungrounded form of the expressive or rhetorical—identity as *role*. White's fiction again has Heideggerean overtones as it moves towards a concept of identity analogous to that outlined by this philosopher. In traditional metaphysical terms identity is related to unity; to a sense of wholeness or completeness, but according to Heidegger's concept, identity is constituted as a relation rather than as a unity. He was concerned to return to a mode of thought that pre-dated the Socratic; one in which Being, rather than knowing, was predominant. In *Identity and Difference* he interprets a Parmenidean fragment, "thought and being are the same," to mean that thought, or man, and being, belong together in the same. His concept of the "Same" does not contain the idea of absolute non-difference. Heidegger interprets sameness to mean a belonging together. He argues:

If we think of belonging *together* in the customary way, the meaning of belonging is determined by the word together, that is, by its unity. In that case, 'to belong' means as much as: to be assigned and placed into the order of a 'together,' established in the unity of a manifold, combined into the unity of a system, mediated by the unifying center of an authoritative synthesis . . . However, belonging together can also be thought of as *belonging* together. This means: the 'together' is now determined by the belonging.³⁵

In other words, identity here does not involve unity. We are reminded here of White's sense of his own fragmented self.

Identity is conceived of by Heidegger as a relation. Under this interpretation of identity, being is a characteristic of identity, rather than the other way round, as in the traditional metaphysical view. "Being is determined by an identity as a characteristic of that identity."³⁶ This subverts epistemology by removing being-as-ground. Being or *Sein*

³⁴ 'Failure as Ontology,' 79.

³⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans., Joan Stambaugh (New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1969), 39.

³⁶ *Identity and Difference*, 28.

which, as Michael Gelven tells us, is the infinitive form of the verb "to be"³⁷ and is, therefore, not an entity, now comes into focus. This is not being-as-ground, but being-as-becoming. Heidegger is not concerned with the nature of entities which can be identified as objects of knowledge, but with the nature of existence as such. The radical Cartesian split between self and world implied in the concept of consciousness is elided as the theatrical is seen as analogous to the Heideggerean unitary structure Being-in-the-world. The apparent dichotomy is in fact illusory. The attempt to delve down to some essential substratum is always prone to become a fruitless search as if, as in Wittgenstein's analogy: "In order to find the real artichoke, we divested it of its leaves"(P.J. sec. 164). We have what is in fact a continuum, one which is suggested by Carolyn Bliss when she writes that White accomplishes "a dilation of the self toward widening circles."³⁸ The "circle" here, I would argue, is the rhetorical sphere of the stage-space wherein the self is expressed, rather than a metaphysically determined ultimate circle wherein the self is indicated.

The ostensible split between character and consciousness thus becomes, within the stage-space, the ungrounded relationship of being and becoming. W. D. Ashcroft writes, in relation to *Voss* that, being "is not an essence, but . . . a becoming through time."³⁹ In the last four novels White grapples with the implications of this by presenting us with characters who embody both. In *The Eye of the Storm* Mary de Santis, for example, follows "a religion – of perpetual becoming."⁴⁰ The image offered here suggests both stasis, in the fixity of religious belief, and fluidity, in the idea of becoming. The religious is realised as theatre in "the rituals of her secret faith" (12). The theatrical is further adumbrated in the word "perpetual" which, in its connotation of repetition, assumes the *role* of the eternal. (As I will argue, the essence of theatrical structure is repeatability.) Hers is a becoming, but one which is carried forth as a kind of theatre in its ritualistic repetition. In the case of many of the characters in these final novels the absolute is realised as theatre in the roles they adopt. These roles operate as forms containing or encapsulating the flux; they operate as a kind of pseudo-ground denying

³⁷ Gelven, 18 and 21.

³⁸ Carolyn Bliss, 'Transpositions: Patrick White's Most Recent Fiction,' *Westerly*, 3 (September, 1989), 79.

³⁹ 'More Than One Horizon,' 131.

⁴⁰ Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 11. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

the presence of being. Becoming operates within limits as theatre rather than within any metaphysically absolute limits. Any state achieved by the characters is essentially ungrounded. The "meaning of life" is that which can be extracted from the scenes in which life is elaborated.

Elizabeth Hunter has a fixed quality which has to do with her part in the structure of *The Eye of the Storm*. She is the centre of the human storm, and the focus of attention for the other characters in the novel, yet she is also "saved" by "motion" (198). Her self-containment is not entire as "some force not her absent will" gets her moving back into life after her experience in the eye of the storm, since she "had not experienced enough of living" (410). She embodies being and becoming: as the static cage which confines the flow of her children's lives, and as the evolving self which develops within the fixed confines, or theatre, of memory. Ellen Roxburgh in *A Fringe of Leaves* is seen as "a clean sheet of paper which might disclose an invisible writing."⁴¹ The stasis seen here is the containment of the hidden writing within the sheet of paper, while the idea of this writing emerging into view at the instigation of another suggests a process involving development. In *The Twyborn Affair* Eddie Twyborn is seeking to place himself into a greater whole. He sees a need "to fit himself, the missing piece, into a semblance of real life."⁴² Stasis is suggested by the image of the almost completed jigsaw; the piece to be fitted can only fit a space which is predetermined by the totality of the puzzle. At the same time the need to shape oneself to fit this space suggests a process of change and development. As Eadith Trist in the novel's third part she is alarmed at the prospect of the structure of life being wrecked by her friend Gravenor; a structure which is "set by fantasy" (322). We see again fixity in the idea of structure, and fluidity in the idea of fantasy. Alex Gray in *Memoirs of Many in One* seeks "the frame which fitted me," while at the same time asserting that "I've always become anything I intended to."⁴³ Once again stasis is suggested in the image of the frame, while fluidity is suggested in the assertion of her ability to transform herself at will. The theatrical embodies this tension between being and becoming (or between being and Being) that is seen in

⁴¹ Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 17. All subsequent references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.

⁴² Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 146. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

⁴³ Patrick White, *Memoirs of Many in One* (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1987), 49. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

these characters.

As stated earlier, truth is, according to Heidegger, a function of Being-there (Dasein). Truth is a characteristic of the kind of existence that human beings have. Truth can be compared to being as an absolute ground or quality. Thus becoming, or existence, causes that which "is"—"truth"—to "be" that which it is. In fact all absolutes can be interpreted as functions of existence. The question then is: how is being, which is, in this model, a function of existence, to be represented, since representation depends on the static forms of being (the "image" for example)? It is my argument that White does this through a kind of rhetorical inversion whereby existence, or becoming, is given the character of being. Becoming appears *as* being—it is given the character, identity, or role of being in the theatrical mode. White's "theatrical" presents us with a static framework within which change occurs. Theatrical action unfolds, but it does so within the limits of a script and within the confines of the stage. It thus operates as a metaphor of the relationship between being and becoming. The roles that appear in the theatrical context show up as roles because of the space which is characterised as "theatre." What is seen is not the thing *in* itself, but the thing *as* itself. An ultimate truth or absolute being never appears since it can only appear-*as* inasmuch as another takes on its form, or assumes the *role* of being. Here Being, or becoming, assumes the form of being as it is realised as role. There is no contradiction here between the idea of unbounded meaning structures and the theatrical which is structured on a series of bounded scenes. The theatrical boundedness is a rhetorical device allowing that which it presents to show up as that which it is.

My use of the term "theatre" incorporates a parallel between the word in its broadest sense—as a sphere or place in which action occurs—and the most general Heideggerean existential, Being-in-the-world. In this parallel "theatre" encompasses the notion of Being-in, and in this it is analogous to the Heideggerean existential. It is thus not any absolute category which erects metaphysical forms. It is a strategy designed to throw a net around becoming and to give it the appearance of being. It is a rhetorical, or expressive, rather than an absolute structure. Here the word "rhetorical" is used to suggest "the force that pulls us away from [an absolute] center and into its own world of ever-shifting shapes and

shimmering surfaces."⁴⁴ This is unitary, but only in a sense that is analogous to the Heideggerean unitary structure Being-in-the-world, and is thus different from the metaphysically posited unities of those views quoted above. This unity within becoming is an ungrounded unity; it is a relation in which that which is "unified" is held together and, at the same time, held apart. This does not cause the two to conflate, rather, the flux invades the flash, allowing the latter to show up *as* that which it is. There are not two kinds of things, the absolute and the contingent, but a unitary form, analogous to the theatre, which causes one part to show up *as* the absolute. It is thus the form of the theatrical, or rather, the theatrical *as* form which lies behind my employment of the term here.

Role, through its inherent characteristic of repeatability, mimics the structure of absolute form. Thus: "The presence-of-the-present is derived from repetition and not the reverse."⁴⁵ In order for being to appear *as* being, a space of unconcealment is required; it will not appear as being unless it is seen against a background, or perhaps more accurately, a space; one which here takes on the lineaments, rhetorically, of essential being. White in doing this grapples with the apparent conflict between being and becoming contained in the Nietzschean injunction expressed by Zarathustra to: "Become what you are!"⁴⁶ There is here no arrival at a state of being which follows a process of becoming, rather there is a continual becoming. That is, becoming *masquerades* as being in that what is seen as being is part of the flow of existence and is not separate from it—is not transcendent. The theatre of the self that White elaborates is a means of realising Nietzsche's aphorism: "To impose upon becoming the character of being; this is the supreme will to power,"⁴⁷ since we see becoming *as* being as it is held within the static confines of the theatrical space. The frame operates as a metaphor of being, the action as a metaphor of becoming; the latter is thus given the character of the former. The theatrical, through the role structure, is also analogous to the Nietzschean eternal recurrence, in which becoming, through unvaried repetition, takes on the character of being. We read in *The Will to Power*

⁴⁴ Stanley Fish, 'Rhetoric,' *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 306.

⁴⁵ *Speech and Phenomena*, 52.

⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans., R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 353.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Press, 1968), sec. 617.

that "that *everything recurs* is the closest approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being" (sec. 617). The script and the theatrical space are the parameters for repetition and as such appropriate both being and becoming into a total "theatrical" structure. Thus Basil Hunter attempts to reach a state of pure being in the adoption of roles, through which he can enter into a structure of recurrence.

Theatrical elements can be discerned in White's earlier fiction, but they do not operate to undermine the underlying metaphysical assumptions. Such an example is the episode in *The Tree of Man* (1956) where Stan Parker points with his stick at a gob of spittle and says: "'That is God'."⁴⁸ This has been taken to be significant in itself and to point to, for example, a secular vision of life.⁴⁹ However, as Dorothy Green points out, Stan makes his statement "in a very particular context, and his remark cannot be understood unless the whole of it is taken into account."⁵⁰ In other words, meaning is here related to setting and to the theatrical through Barthes's proposition that: "The theater is precisely the practice which calculates the place of things, as they are observed."⁵¹ Yet in this novel some kind of absolute vision is suggested; that of "the ultimate circle." We see this in the passage describing the elderly Stan seated in his garden at the centre of a series of circles. Here:

All was circumference to the centre, and beyond that the worlds of other circles, whether crescent of purple villas or the bare patches of earth . . . The last circle but one was the cold and golden bowl of winter, enclosing all that was visible and material, and at which the man would blink from time to time, out of his watery eyes, unequal to the effort of realizing he was the centre of it (474).

The scenic spread of meaning is contained within metaphysical forms figured in the image of the circle and "the cold and golden bowl of winter." Here there is suggested a metaphysical ultimate rather than an ironic appearance of the mundane *as* the absolute. Carolyn Bliss writes that Stan "embraces all change within constancy. The constancy is that of the ultimate circle, which is also the Ultimate Other, the God of constancy who administers but is very much immanent within the inconstant

⁴⁸ Patrick White, *The Tree of Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 476. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁹ See 'Patrick White's Götterdämmerung,' 10.

⁵⁰ Dorothy Green, 'The Edge of Error', *Quadrant*, 85-86 (September-December, 1973), 37.

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,' *Narrative Apparatus Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 172.

world."⁵² Here a transcendent significance is pointed to in the unmentioned final circle; the circle of God. This vision remains intact despite the comically bathetic intrusion of the ironically inadequate messenger of the ultimate circle, "the young evangelist," and Stan's attempt, by pointing to his own spittle and proclaiming it God, to unsettle him. This scene is theatrical in its effect yet this mode does not undercut the metaphysical forms which lie beyond. Stan remains in a condition of "peace and understanding" (476). White here attempts to erect containing images which suggest a metaphysical ultimate. What is offered here is a dualistic view of reality which is both metaphysical and relational. In the later novels, however, such absolute forms are eroded as the focus shifts from the attempt to see the ultimate figured in existence to the elaboration of states of Being; to the pure expression of existence itself.

Existence can be thought of as the flux. Within this flow unity can be achieved, but only momentarily—in a flash. Søren Kierkegaard writes that:

Only momentarily can a particular individual, existing, be in a unity of the infinite and the finite that transcends existing. This instant is the moment of passion (C.U.P. 197).

He further adds that:

An existing person cannot be in two places at the same time, cannot be subject-object. When he is closest to being in two places at the same time, he is in passion; but passion is only momentary, and passion is the highest pitch of subjectivity (C.U.P. 199).

It is this that we see in the passage from *The Vivisector* where a moment of insight, of the union of subject and object, is a function of an intensification in the flow of existence—of a moment of passion. It is thus expressive of Being rather than indicative of a being. It is this idea that can be seen in the scene from *The Eye of the Storm* where Elizabeth Hunter encounters a tropical cyclone. It is useful, in order to highlight significant differences in White's later novels, to compare a passage from *Voss* (1957) with this episode from the later novel. In the earlier novel Le Mesurier on one occasion rides his horse through a storm. As the tempest increases

he dragged the hat off, and stuffed it into his saddle bag. At once his matted hair began to stream out, and as the wind encircled the pale, upper half of

⁵² Bliss, 'Patrick White,' 514.

his forehead, he seemed to be relieved of some of the responsibility of human personality. The wind was filling his mouth and running down through the acceptant funnel of his throat, till he was completely possessed by it; his heart was thunder, and the jagged nerves of lightning were radiating from his own body.

But it was not until the farther side of the ridge, going down, and he was singing the storm up out of him, that the rain came, first with a few whips, then with the release of cold, grey light and solid water, and he was immersed in the mystery of it, he was dissolved, he was running into crannies, and sucked into the mouths of the earth, and disputed, and distributed, but again and again, for some purpose, was made one by the strength of a will not his own.⁵³

The similarities between this episode and the occasion when Elizabeth Hunter encounters the eye of the cyclone are clear. Le Mesurier is "encircled," just as Mrs Hunter is contained in the circular eye of the tropical storm. The wind runs down "the acceptant funnel" of the horseman's throat, while the old woman huddles "as the storm came roaring back down the funnel in which she had clenched herself" (411). Le Mesurier loses his sense of humanity and is "dissolved," while Elizabeth Hunter "was no longer a body" (408). The former is "made one by the strength of a will not his own," while the latter is given "back her significance" through the agency of "some force not her absent will" (410).

The dissimilarities are, however, more telling than these points of congruence. Le Mesurier seems to be part of the storm itself as he sings it "up out of him." Mrs Hunter is at one, not with the storm, but with the transient pure centre of "being," which is, in turn, surrounded at a distance by the cyclone. However, this cyclone is presented with theatrical overtones; we see it in the distance "its walls hung with vaporous balconies" (409). Elizabeth Hunter is enclosed in a brightly lit space akin to a stage. The horseman is engaged by a "will not his own," while the old woman is affected by something that is not of the will. We may surmise that the will alluded to in *Voss* is transcendent. When Frank reaches Angus and Turner huddled under a rock ledge and "happy . . . but within human limits" (249), we are told that he "who had been admitted to infinity at times, did not wish to enter their circle." Elizabeth Hunter is influenced by something outside herself, but it is something quite different from that which touches Frank Le Mesurier. She submits to a subtle presence, called "the linesman," who is "testing for the highest pitch of awfulness the human spirit can endure" (409). This image is part of a

⁵³ Patrick White, *Voss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 348-349. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

complex of ideas that includes the reference to her "diseased conscience which had taken over during the night from her defector will" (410). The linesman and her conscience are related, and together point to the scene which surrounds the cyclone experience, in which Basil and Dorothy try to persuade their mother to enter a retirement village. This scene is strongly theatrical and embodies "the highest pitch of awfulness." That this is mediated by a "linesman" suggests a line of attachment; a continuum, which is a metaphor of becoming. The meaning of this scene is played out in extension beyond its confines, while meaning in the scene from *Voss* is self-contained

In addition, the passage describing Mrs Hunter as lying "clenched" in a "funnel" down which the storm rages suggests a connection with that scene where she "had clamped her jaws" (398). In the passage from *Voss* the wind blows into and fills "the acceptant funnel" of Le Mesurier's throat. There is here a suggestion of self-containment which is lacking in the passage from the later novel. This episode is not connected to an enclosing scene as in the passage involving Elizabeth Hunter. The latter scene is part of a theatrically conceived continuum. In this, I would argue, the later novel offers a different structure of meaning wherein theatrical elements operate as a metaphor of the relationship of becoming and being wherein the process of becoming takes on the appearance of being. These elements connect the scene in a non-metaphysical way to a signifying existential continuum, rather than the metaphysical infinite of *Voss*. Elizabeth Hunter's experience is a moment of static being caused by a passionate reaction to an ongoing human situation. This context allows the moment of "pure being" to be seen *as* a "transcendent" moment, whereas in the earlier novel White appears to be attempting to suggest the absolute itself. Le Mesurier's statement that: "The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but by failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming" (271) suggests, in this context, a becoming which flows into ultimate being, or truth. This is implied in the idea that becoming *solves* the "mystery of life."

By the time of *The Solid Mandala* (1966) the theatrical begins to emerge more clearly as a non-metaphysical trope of containment representing the relationship between the flow of becoming and the frozen moment of revelation or being. At one point Arthur Brown is described at his place of employment, Allwright's store:

Sometimes he would simply lean against a post with the empty theatre of the distance spread around him, no sound but the hooting of a train in the cutting or a chattering of sods in the coral tree, as he took out one of those glass marbles left over from the school yard. Not to play with. It had developed into something more serious than play. For the circle of the distant mountains would close around him, the golden disc spinning closer in the sky, as he contemplated the smaller sphere lying on the palm of his hand.⁵⁴

Here we see the problem tackled through the reduction of the extended space of existence, or becoming, to a bounded form suggestive of being; here figured in the glass mandala. The "being" of the mandala, unlike the circles of *The Tree of Man*, or the absolute of *Voss*, which appear to be part of the ultimate structure of reality itself, is a rhetorical device designed to draw "the empty theatre of distance" into the theatre of the mandala. "Theatre" suggests a bounded form which parallels the mandala as a containing image and which introduces a secular, or mundane, note which contests the religious, or transcendental, connotations of the latter. Here is the Nietzschean relationship between the two where: "Becoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions . . . Becoming does not aim at a final state, does not flow into 'being'."⁵⁵ The theatrical can be seen as a fictional trope intended to draw the unbounded flux of existence into a bounded rhetorical structure which appropriates the form of being and which does not represent an ultimate into which becoming can in fact flow. Becoming assumes the guise of being. In order to represent becoming the latter must be given the character of being, it must be caught and held in a non-absolute form. This idea is taken up more thoroughly in the last four novels where the space of becoming is often a theatrical space.

The figure of the dance often appears in White's fiction. It is a theatrical structure in which there is neither duality nor unity and which can operate as a metaphor of the kind of ungrounded holding together of being and becoming that can be seen in the passage just considered. In *The Eye of the Storm* it is part of a theatrical performance in being realised as Lotte Lippmann's *Tingeltangel*. This may be seen to represent an attempt to reach a transcendent state. It is an escape from contingent reality; something that Lotte runs away to (145). However, it also

⁵⁴ Patrick White, *The Solid Mandala* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 233. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

⁵⁵ *Will to Power*, sec. 708.

represents the will to live, or life itself, as Arthur Brown's dance includes "the passion of all their lives" (266), and as we are told in *Dancing with Both Feet on the Ground*: "Life doesn't end on the kitchen floor while there is the will to dance."⁵⁶ It is also connected to the idea of wholeness, as Lotte tells Basil: "'If I could choose - if I could begin again - I would ask to create one *whole* human being'" (143). The dance, a theatrical performance, thus encompasses all that is assigned to the metaphysically distinct areas of the transcendent and the mundane. Lotte's dance is a kind of formless form embodying both being (form) and becoming (the formless).

Lotte performs just before Elizabeth Hunter's death. Her dance becomes a kind of theatre of the transcendent as Mrs Hunter reflects that:

Now surely, at the end of your life, you can expect to be shown the inconceivable something you have always, it seems, been looking for. Though why you should expect it through the person of a steamy, devoted, often tiresome Jewess standing on one leg the other side of a veil of water (which is all that human vision amounts to) you could not have explained. Unless because you are both human, and consequently, flawed (526).

The dance here is connected with the idea of vision. Arthur Brown performs his dance for Mrs Poulter "because he felt he would make her *see*" (*Italics mine*) (265). Lotte's dance, her *Tingeltangel*, represents "heights to which she aspired" (524) and it is connected (not just through the structural similarity between the two words) to Ellen Roxburgh's vision of Tintagel in *A Fringe of Leaves*. In the latter novel Tintagel represents some kind of transcendent state, and is associated with the scaling of heights. In one scene Ellen goes up into the attic of her husband's home and scratches the word TINTAGEL on the glass of a window with a diamond. We are told that her fear of the act being discovered is not well founded since "neither her husband nor her mother-in-law was likely to climb so high" (68). It is not merely a physical height that is suggested here, and it may be interpreted as suggesting either a metaphysical or existential ultimate. Later, as Ellen and Chance approach Moreton Bay, the former climbs high into a tree and sees the Oakes's farm in the distance. Here the act of climbing high is imbued with a transcendental significance as "she continued climbing, and as she rose the sun struck at her through the foliage furbishing her with the same gold" (286). This echoes an earlier passage where Ellen, in imagining Tristan's arrival in Tintagel, sees "the ship's prow entering the narrow cove, in a moment of evening sunlight,

⁵⁶ Patrick White, *Three Uneasy Pieces* (Fairfield: Pascoe Publishing, 1987), 33.

through a fuzz of hectic summer green" (45). Tintagel is thus connected with the return to civilization figured in the vision Ellen receives, from her "transcendent" height, of the farm, as well as to the romantic dreams of her youth. We thus see a continuum wherein the sublime and the mundane conflate: the flash, the sun striking at her through the lofty tree branches, is one with the flux, the daily grind of the farm and the settlement. Seen thus, as a scenic continuum, the transcendent flash is part of the broader flux—the two are not distinct. We see here something in line with what Joseph Frank finds in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* where "the unit of meaning. . . [is] the totality of each level of action taken as an integer"⁵⁷

Lotte's dance is performed immediately before Mrs Hunter's demise. It enacts existence itself—the flow towards death. It does not follow set forms, despite Mrs Hunter's complaints to this effect; it is "a dance she had never performed before" (525). It is a dance in which, as she tells the old lady, "I must feel my way." She becomes "embraced by it" (527). and it modulates into something "by which she was possessed." It becomes something "more fluid"(528), a gallop, and it develops a rushing momentum figured in the image of a speeding train surging towards "incurable illness old age death corruption." In other words, Lotte's dance is the enfolding of the flow of existence. In the same way, Ellen Roxburgh's Tintagel is the flow of existence as it leads, not to any transcendent beyond, but back into the scenes of everyday life located at the Moreton Bay settlement. The flash of revelation from the tree top flows into the continuum of the seasonal life of the farm. This works against any attempt to see a dualistic scheme in this novel.⁵⁸ Ellen, in climbing, and Lotte in dancing, *enact* the symbolic: the abstract becomes a theatrical *activity*. Thus the figures of the dance and theatre lie behind the presentation of the ultimate within the mundane in the White's last quartet of novels.

We see here a tension between that which is contained in a moment, and that which is elaborated in extension. This is related to the relationship between being and becoming in which being represents a

⁵⁷ Joseph Frank, 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature,' *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, eds., Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1988), 87.

⁵⁸ See Virginia Kirby-Smith Carruthers, 'Patrick White's Improbable Iseult: Living Legend in *A Fringe of Leaves*,' *Antipodes* 6, 1, 1992, for example.

contained and bounded form while becoming is that which is played out in a space beyond these forms. It is a tension that Wittgenstein explored in his *Philosophical Investigations*. He writes:

But can't the meaning of a word that I understand fit the sense of a sentence that I understand? Or the meaning of one word fit the meaning of another?—Of course, if the meaning is the *use* we make of the word, it makes no sense to speak of such 'fitting.' But we *understand* the meaning of a word when we hear or say it; we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the 'use' which is extended in time! (*P.I.* sec. 138)

Wittgenstein goes on to consider the situation when the word "cube" is said and he understands what it means. He asks:

But can the whole *use* of the word come before my mind, when I *understand* it in this way?

Well, but on the other hand isn't the meaning of the word also determined by this use? And can these ways of determining meaning conflict? Can what we grasp *in a flash* accord with a use, fit or fail to fit it? And how can what is present to us in an instant, what comes before our mind in an instant, fit a *use*?

He goes on to say that what comes before our minds when we understand a word might be a picture. He proceeds to show that this picture does not necessarily force a particular application. "The picture of the cube did indeed *suggest* a certain use to us, but it was possible for me to use it differently" (*P.I.* secs. 138-139). In other words, Wittgenstein is arguing against the metaphysical notion of form as an inviolable boundary which determines, in this case, the meaning of the word "cube." The flash does not determine a particular use since, as Wittgenstein suggests, it can *conflict* with that use. The flash does not, therefore, form a ground. In a sense the flash is determined by the flux, or the flash is part of a greater meaning generating process, one which is essentially indeterminate. We arrive at a continuum, one which is formed by the ongoing scenes in which particular uses are elaborated.

Henry Staten, in explication of Wittgenstein's ideas, writes that:

It is only in a certain setting, in terms of certain circumstances, that signs mean what they mean; yet the circumstances seem to be only the inessential background against which we think the essence . . . The 'overall role' of a word is thus not to be thought of as its place as defined within an abstract, synchronic system but as the qualitative or 'physiognomic' character of the sensuous-appearing word as it emerges from the panoply of its syntactic settings. . . This means that in a particular case the meaning of a sign is

always dispersed across the sequence of elements that constitute the sign situation.⁵⁹

Thus, in the final novels of Patrick White we can see, in line with Wittgenstein's analysis, that "meaning" is a sensuous playing out of significance in the tension between flash and flux; between the momentary and the extended and between being and becoming. Neither forms a ground, in that neither can guarantee a particular viewpoint. Thus we do not arrive at any metaphysical essence or unity. We have instead a rhetorical frame, analogous to a theatrical frame, which allows that which appears to appear *as* that which it is. "Reality" in White's final novels becomes reality-effects: the world is not seen as a spectacle, it is interpreted as a system of signs.

What appears in these novels is a movement away from the flash and a corresponding move towards the flux. The idea that an ultimate truth can be discerned beyond the mundane world is one which is subverted in them. In this process the question of identity emerges more compellingly, but identity conceived of as a relation rather than a unity. One of the most pervasive ways in which the inessential nature of reality and identity is suggested in these texts is the theatrical. The theatrical is not merely a mode of presentation, or a metaphor of the artificial as opposed to the real, but is the embodiment of the ungrounded structure of existence and identity within existence. White moves away from those imperatives associated with the modernist movement's quest for the absolute and into a non-essentialist concern with existence itself which might be characterised as post-modernist.⁶⁰ These final novels represent significant developments in White's fiction. There is not any loss of vision or authorial power, rather there is the elaboration of aspects that were foreshadowed in earlier novels and which here reach new levels of suggestiveness.

Chapter Two will be concerned to show how those theatrical elements which become obvious in *The Eye of the Storm* signal the real

⁵⁹ Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 79-80.

⁶⁰ Here we see something akin to the deconstructive project wherein "deconstruction repeatedly demonstrates the impossibility of modernity by soliciting the other which, though never present, 'always already' haunts presence." Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 33-34.

beginning of those features mentioned above. The next chapter will show how *A Fringe of Leaves*, a novel which does not appear to have theatrical elements as clearly as does White's previous one, is in fact suffused with modes of presentation which are analogous to theatrical forms. Following this, my discussion of *The Twyborn Affair* in Chapter Four will focus on the question of identity and the ways in which the theatrical operates to shift White's fiction further away from the attempt to lay hold of the ultimate. The final chapter will deal with *Memoirs of Many in One* and I will argue that this novel fits into a pattern of development that begins in earnest with *The Eye of the Storm* and which culminates in this novel with an almost totally ungrounded view of reality in which theatrical elements again perform a key role.

Chapter 2

The Tingeltangel

In *The Eye of the Storm* we are made aware continually of the conditions of vision. We are confronted with the question as to whether the structures of reality are presented to us as a spectacle, or whether our vision is inevitably distorted by the predicament of existence. It is the question as to whether our position is that of a detached observer, or whether our seeing is a mode of our Being and thus an aspect of the performance of life. The novel hints at an analogy in which a constructed reality projected onto a screen consisting of "a piece of disintegrating silk stretched on a rickety, tottering frame" (238) is contrasted to the immutable forms which must lie behind it, if only one had the courage to remove the screen and see. The modernist quest for some kind of essential revelation based on the primacy of the visual is suggested here. This quest involves "the writer's attempt to transform linguistic signifiers into iconic emblems,"¹ and to find "by what symbol (or constellation of symbols) can man transcend the immediate and experience the eternal, the ultimately real."² White, while retaining some aspects of this modernist project in his fiction, in this novel in particular employs rhetorical structures which contest this possibility.³ White can be seen as grappling with the consequences of the condition of enclosure within existence and the difficulty in transcending this existential predicament in order to "see" in any absolute sense. This enclosure does not lead to the seeing of the absolute, but to the seeing of the contingent *as* the absolute as it assumes the guise or the role of the immutable in the theatrical mode. John Colmer finds this "a very

¹ Thiher, 4.

² F. W. Dillistone, 'Meaning and Meaninglessness in Recent Literature,' in *Man: Fallen and Free: Oxford Essays on the Condition of Man* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969), 74.

³ This view works against what White himself saw as his project in this novel, which involved the quest for "the final answer." Patrick White, *Letters*, ed., David Marr (Sydney: Random House, 1994), p.410.

theatrically conceived novel,"⁴ and it is my argument that this theatricality operates at a level which contests the whole notion of the possibility of the modernist apprehension of the timeless.

At the outset the novel shows us the purblind Mrs Hunter together with her night nurse Mary de Santis. The morning light spills through the window producing an effect in which "there was a bloom of moonstones on the dark grove of furniture" (9). There is here a sense of closeness and of closedness in which the condition of seeing is foregrounded. Seeing becomes seeing-*as* as the details of furnishing blur into the details of landscape, the scene becoming an interpreted roomscape. The old woman is "hemmed in, not only by the visible landscape of hills and scrub, but by the landscape of her mind" (28). We are told that: "She had always seen too clearly" (14) and she conjures up the images of her children "fluctuating on the dark screen" (27). This image suggests, not a mental locus of reality, but that seeing is a perception within a particular context. It is an enclosed perception, as in a theatre, or in other words, a seeing-*as*. Much of the novel is just such a projected imagining or recollection by Elizabeth Hunter. Basil reflects that his mother "cannot see except by flashes of lightning" (264), and that: "There had been a time when he saw clearly, right down to the root of the matter, before his perception had retired behind a legerdemain of technique and the dishonesties of living." All the characters are in a condition of entrapment, and all seek a way out of this condition. It is this condition that may be characterised as "theatrical" inasmuch as this term can operate as a metaphor of the condition of being within and enclosed by life; of the always already being-there of existence.

In *The Eye of the Storm* theatrical elements emerge more clearly than in White's earlier novels. The main character, Elizabeth Hunter, is an actress by temperament, while her son Basil is one by profession. Mark Williams writes that the former "turns the surrounding world into a kind of stage for self-projection and casts those in it as aspects of her own self."⁵ In this she is like White himself; the writer who uses fiction as a means of introducing to an audience a multi-faceted self. Indeed White characterised Elizabeth Hunter in a letter to Cynthia

⁴ John Colmer, *Patrick White* (London: Methuen, 1984), 69.

⁵ Mark Williams, *Patrick White* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 123.

Nolan as "a great beauty, bitch, charismatic figure, destroyer and affirmer all in one,"⁶ and she reflects of herself that "we are not one, but many" (100). Many of the novel's scenes are theatrically conceived; for example, that which involves Basil's return to his mother is a "theatre of reunion" (120). It is played out amid "storm effects" and the sound of "zinc thunder" (142). Basil hesitates on first seeing her "as though he had found an understudy waiting on the spot where his leading lady should have been" (118). She, in turn, "recovered her technique", and together they are seen "clawing at each other . . . while they played their scene" (119). This, we are told was one of "those evenings when all the elements of a performance, on either side of the footlights, are perfectly fused."

This fusion hints at a relationship between mother and son in which Basil reflects that:

Most of him derived from Betty Salkeld [Mrs Hunter's maiden name], an *ingénue* stationed behind the willows at the bend in the river to see who was clopping over the bridge, and Elizabeth Hunter, a *grande dame* descending the stairs (128).

However, as Richard Wilson points out, Elizabeth Hunter is, in contrast to the other characters, including her son, "consummate in playing all the social roles that her life presented to her, creating one whole human being by in spirit fully playing the 'I'." I would disagree, though, that "Elizabeth Hunter knows that screens exist only to be lifted"⁷ since she is as trapped within a labyrinth of screens as any in the novel. For example, as I will elaborate in greater detail later, the moment of revelation in the centre of the cyclone is a contained moment, within the circling walls of the storm's eye. We can also see this condition of embeddedness in the scene immediately before Mrs Hunter's death when her housekeeper dances for her. This was "their dance" (525) and the two are united as Lotte feels her way and "their movements became more fluid" (528). Here they take up Mitty Jacka's challenge to Basil to "flow" (234). As the dance climaxes Lotte is "embraced by it" and Mrs Hunter as well is a dancer as: "She moaned for what the dancers had coming to them" (527). "All around her she

⁶ *Letters*, 402.

⁷ Richard Wilson, "'The Splinters of a Mind Make a Whole Piece:' Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm*," *Studies in the Recent Australian Novel*, ed. K. G. Hamilton (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), 73.

could hear the sound of the woman's breathing as she fought the dance by which she was possessed." We can see here an ambiguity which conflates the two as dancers together in the same dance. Together they are caught up and enclosed by the dance which possesses a life of its own. The flow of the dance is the flow of existence; one which neither can transcend. It is an entanglement in Lotte's *Tingeltangel*. Lotte says that this is something: "I run away to" (145), and something which is "drunkenness." The *Tingeltangel* thus mimics the transcendent and the ecstatic. Thus tangled the two are held within a *theatrical* form in the figure of the dance. In fact all the novel's characters are entangled in an interconnected web; one which reflects, not a metaphysical unity, but the disparate scenes of life.

What is at issue here is the possibility of realising the metaphysical quest for being and essence; of that which lies outside this existential flow. It is this possibility that Derrida attacks in his critique of Husserlian phenomenology in *Speech and Phenomena*. Just as the dance forms an ungrounded ground so too, according to Derrida: "*The sign is originally wrought by fiction*" (56). The logic of Derrida's deconstruction rests on the idea that there can be no pure origin that can operate to present the thing itself to a subject. We cannot see the thing itself. The origin is only the origin by virtue of the following term. "Second" is needed by "first" in order for it to be first, since if nothing followed it would not be the origin of anything, and it is only by virtue of what follows, after an interval, that it is "original." Vincent Descombes writes that:

Origin must therefore be conceived as a dress rehearsal (*la répétition d'une première*), in the theatrical sense of these words: the reproduction of the first public performance, yet prior to this performance. Thus 'it is non-origin that is originary.' At the origin, or if we prefer, *in principio*, there no longer subsists that tranquil identity in which the primitive is only primitive. If there had only been simple identity at the origin, nothing would have come of it.⁸

Upon this idea rests the impossibility of distinguishing the *original* from the *derived*. Lotte's dance enacts this dilemma. It is a theatre of transcendence wherein no reaching of an authentic ground or essence is possible. The evocation of the "origin" is always, as Descombes

⁸ Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge Uni. Press, 1980), 145.

points out, theatrical. David B. Allison writes in his introduction to Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena* that:

Derrida concludes that the whole problem and history of language must be entirely rethought. Instead of trying to capture and retain a pure presence, we must conceive signification from the start as a movement *away* from self-presence, a movement away from the pure presence of a discrete origin and the ideal presence of an identical meaning-content. As a movement of difference, signification precedes and gives rise to the very concepts of self, presence, and meaning. The proper account of signification begins, not with the present and fulfilled meaning-content, but with the sense that remains to be assembled and built up across the itinerary of convention and practice (Translator's Introduction, xxxvii-xxxviii).

Here is something akin to the Wittgensteinian locus of meaning in use. "The sign is not a full presence in itself, but always sends us towards something other than itself, those other signs whose trace it bears."⁹ Mrs Hunter must build up significance across the whole of her life, thus the frequent flashbacks to past events. She looks for "the inconceivable something" (526) in Lotte's dance, but it entangles them. There is here, as Descombes writes, no "simple identity at the origin." Vision is compromised: it is a seeing through "a veil of water." It is a vision which can only ever be "*human vision*" (*italics mine*).

Basil's reflection that his ability to "see clearly, right down to the root of the matter" has been compromised by his adopting "a legerdemain of technique," or the strategies of acting, is in fact a recognition of what is a consequence of existence: that it is impossible to see the thing in itself in distinction from a constructed reality. Here White contests that quality which Cecil Hadgraft found in *The Tree of Man* where the author "deploys at its fullest his capacity to snare, as far as words may do, *das Ding an sich*, the thing in itself."¹⁰ It is this inability to get outside existence in order to see it that Kierkegaard writes of. We are inevitably caught in a theatre where we are removed from a pure presence by an unalterable gap or space. As Derrida suggests, the structure of reality is not simply that of "world" first, then significance; it is rather sign first, then "reality" as a function of the movement of signification. Just as the theatre generates a reality or a world out of the dramatic flow of en-scened action (its signs), so this novel employing analogous structures of meaning contests any simple

⁹ Thiher, 87.

¹⁰ Cecil Hadgraft, 'The Theme of Revelation in Patrick White's Novels,' *Southerly*, No. 1, (1977), 36.

view in which meaning is directed from a world through signs to a comprehensible vision of an ultimate reality. Signification has a seeing-as structure in which meaning is directed outward into the total scene in which the signifying movement takes place.

To illustrate this point I will refer to the much-quoted episode from *The Eye of the Storm* in which Elizabeth Hunter experiences a moment of "transcendent" peace and understanding. In this scene Elizabeth and her daughter Dorothy have been invited by their friends, the Warmings, to stay with them in their holiday home on Brumby Island off the Queensland coast. While there Elizabeth, left alone, is caught in the middle of a tropical cyclone and experiences the weird tranquillity of the storm's eye. This episode is presented as a flashback; a reminiscence of the dying Elizabeth. She is an 86 year old former beauty and Sydney socialite who is approaching death in her home attended by three nurses. Her son Basil, a famous actor based in London, and her daughter Dorothy, who is unhappily married to a French aristocrat, fly to Australia after they hear that their mother has suffered a stroke. Both hope to get money when Elizabeth dies: Dorothy to escape her failed marriage, and Basil to finance a play he wants to do, based on his own life. All three exist in a complex love-hate relationship. Elizabeth is particularly skilled in the art of cruelty in her relationships with other people. It is a "capacity" which "would never fail her" (71). An intense battle of wills ensues as the siblings put into effect what is tantamount to a murder plot. This involves sending their mother to a retirement home, the Thorogood Village. All three are well aware that this is equivalent to a death sentence. Contained within this narrative of the present are a number of flashbacks to past events of significance. The particular flashback which consists of the cyclone episode takes place as the "murderers" gather at their mother's bedside to tell her of their plans for her future. The scene is thus enclosed in a broader context, which gives it its meaning.

Elizabeth Hunter humiliates her daughter Dorothy by successfully competing for the attentions of a Norwegian professor also staying on the island. Dorothy leaves and Mrs Hunter, left alone, is caught in the cyclone. The first movement of the storm passes and she wanders out into the eerie calm of the eye.

Without much thought for her own wreckage, she moved slowly down what had been a beach, picking her way between torn-off branches, great beaded hassocks of amber weed, everywhere fish the sea had tossed out, together with a loaf of no longer bread, but a fluffier, disintegrating foam rubber. Just as she was no longer a body, least of all a woman: the myth of her womanhood had been exploded by the storm. She was instead a being, or more likely a flaw at the centre of this jewel of light: the jewel itself, blinding and tremulous at the same time, existed, flaw and all, only by grace; for the storm was still visibly spinning and boiling at a distance, in columns of cloud, its walls hung with vaporous balconies, continually shifted and distorted (409).

She moves through an intensely lit scene filled with debris, birds and water.

All else was dissolved by this lustrous moment made visible in the eye of the storm, and would have remained so, if she had been allowed to choose. She did not feel she could endure further trial by what is referred to as Nature, still less by that unnaturally swollen, not to say diseased conscience which had taken over during the night from her defector will. She would lie down rather, and accept to become part of the shambles she saw on looking behind her: no worse than any she had caused in life in her relationships with human beings. In fact, to be received into the sand along with other deliquescent flesh, strewn horsehair, knotted iron, the broken chassis of an up-turned car, the last echoes of a hamstrung piano, is the most natural conclusion.

Logically, it should have happened. If some force not her absent will had not wrenched at her doll's head and faced it with the object skewered to the snapped branch of a tree. The gull, a homelier version of the white predators, had been reduced to a plaque in haphazard bones and sooty feathers. Its death would have remained unnoticed, if her mind's ear had not heard the cry still tearing free as the breast was pierced.

At least the death cry of the insignificant sooty gull gave her back her significance. It got her creaking to her feet. She began scuttling, clawing her way up the beach by handfuls of air, an old woman and foolish, who in spite of her age had not experienced enough of living.

She returns to her shelter, and lying down awaits the storm's return.

For the eye was no longer focused on her, she could tell; and as it withdrew its attention, it was taking with it the delusions of her feeble mind: the black swans feeding out of her hands and seabirds nestling among the dark blue pyramids.

As the storm came roaring back down the funnel in which she had clenched herself, the salt streamed out of her blinded sockets (410-411).

The question as to the significance of this moment of pure being is not the interesting or important one. The question that requires an answer is the one that Dorothy asks earlier in the novel: "why was it given to Elizabeth Hunter to experience the eye of the storm?" (71). This question shifts the focus of the novel away from a "present and fulfilled meaning content" to those scenes in which Elizabeth exists

and her Being elaborated.¹¹ An answer to this question cannot be given unless this scene is resolved into its before and after. The scene must be attached to its surroundings in order for its full meaning to be seen. Its significance is extended and must be "assembled and built up" from the cross-flow of adjoining scenes.

The "eye" scene takes place within another scene, which is a type of murder scene. It is, furthermore, an instantaneous recollection within this scene. When Dorothy first arrives and is alone with her mother, she is asked by the latter the name of the Norwegian professor they had met on the island fifteen years before (356). There follows the first flashback to the island containing Dorothy's humiliation at her mother's hands. Returning to the present, exactly the same words—"What was that man's name, dear?" "Which man, mother?" (356, 395)—are spoken by Elizabeth and Dorothy. We see that no present time has elapsed during this flashback. The effect of this abruptness is to give this scene the quality of a moment of being, or rather, it allows this scene to be seen under the aspect of being. This moment of being is not "transcendent" in itself, it is so because of the wholly mundane scene in which it occurs and which acts as a backdrop against which it is seen; it is thus seen-*as* that which it is.

The flashback scene exists instantaneously amid a scene of heightened passion. It thus reflects Kierkegaard's idea that the moment of passion is the only time that the fleeting union with the infinite can occur. It irrupts into the midst of a psychic battleground. Dorothy reflects that "she had never hated anyone so bitterly as she had hated their mother on their brief visit to Brumby Island" (356). Indeed, Elizabeth's allusion to the professor is a coldly calculated poison dart aimed straight at her daughter's heart. Dorothy, in turn, feels that this reminder of the hatred she felt for her mother justifies the joint matricide that she plans with Basil. Following this first flashback, Basil arrives and together the two "murderers" inform their mother of her fate. The whole scene has a chilling

¹¹ In this I am not disagreeing with Ann McCulloch that White focuses on the Nietzschean preoccupation with "seeking to minimise the importance of ends, of purposes, and of actions and to maximise the importance of states of being": Ann McCulloch, 'Patrick White's Novels and Nietzsche,' *Australian Literary Studies*, 9, 3 (May 1980), 309, since Nietzsche's concept of being saw it as a function of becoming or Being.

Elizabethan/Jacobean sense of horror. We see cold-blooded, vicious intentions veiled by honeyed words, which are reminiscent of Lightborn's as he gently menaces Edward the Second in Marlowe's play.

Thus Basil says:

'Don't you feel – Mother darling – living alone in this great house full of associations, not all of them happy – does tend to make you morbid?'

Like a child at the dentist's, Elizabeth Hunter had clamped her jaws.

'What you must miss more than anything, I should have thought, is the company of your contemporaries. Which you could enjoy in some efficiently-run institution – or home, dear, home – such as I understand there is on the outskirts of Sydney.'

He looked at his sister. Who saw the sweat lying blue in the field of bluer, incipient stubble (398).

Elizabeth is no pathetic King, however, and she fights them off.

'Something I found out,' she panted, 'on that island – after you had all run away– nothing will kill me before I am intended to die.'

If you could describe your storm; but you could not. You can never convey in words the utmost in experience. Whatever is given you to live, you alone can live, and re-live, till it is gasped out of you.

So she lay gasping, as though the tide had almost fully receded from this estuary of sheets, while they watched her, she could tell, with their unregenerate, gulls' eyes (399).

Following the second flashback scene, in which is contained the description of the "eye" experience, we return again to the present, and the "murder" scene, where Elizabeth reflects:

All the years she had spent lying on this mattress of warm moist sand the gulls had not deserted her. She had never been quite sure of gulls: even the stupid sooty kind, the noddies, are probably waiting to plunge their beaks and empty your sockets (413).

We see here in the flow of the imagery a spreading outward of significance. Her children are gulls waiting to peck out her eyes; her bed is an estuary and a beach. The "eye" scene is not discrete, but is part of a continuum. This is suggested when we look within the "eye" scene itself. We see images which point outward to the surrounding scene. Just as the storm's first phase dies away Elizabeth

lay and submitted to someone to whom she had never been introduced. Somebody is always tinkering with something. It is the linesman testing for the highest pitch of awfulness the human spirit can endure. Not death. For yourself there is no question of dying (408-409).

The image of the linesman, with its connotation of linear connection, links this scene back to the "murder" scene; to that which represents "the highest pitch of awfulness."

On the other side of the "eye" scene is the image of the impaled noddie; the image which Elizabeth says reminded her that no-one can escape suffering (395). This gives "her back her significance", or her identity, which is lost in the moment of pure being. It gets her moving, back into life, away from the urge to deliquesce and into existence with its experiences of living, of which she still had not got enough. From a condition of perfect illumination and clarity, she is returned to the world of contingent existence, a world characterised by blindness and by the inability to see the absolute in itself. Moving out of this moment of recollection, she is returned to the human storm raging around the island of her bed. There is here in this moment of "pure being" no "simple identity." Rather, identity is something that is derived beyond this moment of "pure being." Identity is not related here to an idea of an absolute unity, it is something which subsists in extension and in a relationship with another and which takes on characteristics of multiplicity. As Alexander Nehamas writes in explication of Nietzsche's ideas: "the unity of the self, which therefore also constitutes its identity, is not something given but something achieved, not a beginning but a goal."¹²

Seen in this light, the meaning of the "eye" episode shifts, or rather, spreads. The recollection in which the cyclone is described is produced in response to the threat posed by the "unregenerate gulls," Basil and Dorothy. The experience on the island is, for Elizabeth, a regenerating one, and as such it gives her the power to oppose the unregenerate. The "eye" scene is thrown up to ward off a threat to Elizabeth's life, since the regenerating lesson she learned was that "nothing will kill" her before she is intended to die. The experience in the eye of the storm is one which has been *given her to live*. We see here the answer to Dorothy's question. Elizabeth has been granted this experience because she is the most tenacious and successful liver. As William Walsh suggests:

¹² Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 182.

The book's strongest and most vibrant value, against which I suppose we are to measure the distortions of life, is not virtue in the conventional sense in which it exists in the husband and the nurse but rather the absolute intensity of life represented by Mrs Hunter herself, and perhaps supremely in her dying.¹³

It stands as an affirmation of the forces of life and of the validity of human existence. Seen thus, this episode appears as part of the continuum of existence as well as representing a privileged moment outside of existence. In fact the "eye" experience does not appear to represent a different kind of existence, but is part of a fully realised life; a life which must continue beyond the experience. White is here not attempting to plumb some transcendental depth.

Thus the "eye" scene presents us with an image of the unity of the infinite and the finite that Kierkegaard writes of. This scene operates within a brightly lit space suggestive of a stage with its surrounding scenery of "columns of cloud" and "walls hung with vaporous balconies." Elizabeth tells her daughter that "there was no sign of hatred or fear while we were – encircled" (395). This encircling can be seen as a theatrical moment in a greater dramatic performance in which certain qualities of light and scenery appear *as* pure being. The "murder" scene, which, in turn, encircles the "eye" scene, is charged with suppressed passion. In being "the highest pitch of awfulness," or passion, it becomes, in Kierkegaard's words, "the highest pitch of subjectivity" (C.U.P. 199). We are reminded that Kierkegaard also wrote that "subjectivity is truth" (C.U.P. 203), and a link is apparent here between this idea and the Heideggerean notion of truth as a characteristic of Being. In other words, here is revealed the primacy of performance; of that which is played out in time and space, in the elaboration of the "absolute," or "truth".

It is the intense moment of theatrically charged passion in the surrounding "murder" scene which triggers the recollection of the cyclone and the "transcendental" moment in its still centre. We see that the latter operates as a sign pointing beyond itself to the human storm that envelops it. The "eye" experience is thus part of the continuum of existence (and of becoming), by being subsumed within a

¹³ William Walsh, *Patrick White's Fiction* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), 112.

passion-filled scene. The full significance lies in its being part of a process or performance, rather than what it is in itself. What is suggested is not a seeing of the ultimate, but a seeing-as wherein the ultimate-within-existence is revealed. This seeing-as depends on a structure of difference. In order for the significance to show up it must be seen against a background. Here it is the "murder" scene which encloses it and forms this background. We see here a scene within a scene—a series of theatrical sets. "Reality" is not here as ground; rather it is here as that which shows up *as* that which it is according to a particular context. The unity of being that the "eye" scene appears to depict is in fact a function of a wider scene; a scene which is not a greater unity but an evolving continuum.

What can also be seen here is an uncovering of qualities which have been adumbrated earlier in the novel. Just as existence is a compound of the base and the sublime, so too Elizabeth Hunter herself partakes of this multi-facetedness. "Pure being" is suggested in the person of Elizabeth in the way she is described on occasion. For example, she is described as being luminously white in the scenes where she seduces Athol Shreve and Edvard Pehl. We see here purity mixed with baseness. Also Basil recalls that his "mother was always on the stairs, in an inexhaustible wardrobe, white for preference" (128). Dorothy, after her mother first mentions her experience in the cyclone, sees her "standing at the head of the stairs, one arm outstretched, pointing, in a dress of blinding white such as suited her best" (70). Elizabeth is in fact pointing towards the "eye" scene. Dorothy, after "seeing" her mother pointing, "was frightened to the edge of panic by whatever revelation this vision of earthly authority might be threatening her with." We see a combination of stasis in the inert figure pointing on the stairs, and movement in the impetus towards the "eye" scene. This is analogous to the relationship between being and becoming, and it is bound up with the question of sight and the status of the objects of sight.

This vision of the imperious white figure of Elizabeth Hunter on the stairs pointing is not, in fact, a segregated revelatory moment. It is rather a fully integrated incident, linked to the "eye" episode and its attendant luminosity. The keynote of this scene is not its portentousness, but its theatricality. Elizabeth Hunter is an actor par-

excellence, adopting and playing many roles throughout her life. On one occasion she sees herself "standing outside one of the many envelopes of flesh she could remember wearing" (26). Just as the image of "the linesman" links the "eye" scene to the theatrically conceived murder scene in which it is set, so too does Elizabeth Hunter's pointing delineate a line of significance linking this moment to the later scene. The extravagance of gesture, along with the self-consciously dramatic setting enable it to be seen under the aspect of theatre. As theatre it becomes a segment of an ongoing performance. Its meaning depends on its public nature; on its being enacted in a public stage space. It becomes subsumed into a gestalt, with the result that the apprehension of this moment does not represent a seeing but a seeing-as. There is thus no revelation of essence involved here, but a seeing in context, as against a backdrop or screen. This contests the possibility of the realisation of the modernist quest for iconic revelation.

In order to elucidate this point a consideration of some of Wittgenstein's ideas, followed by an analysis of another scene taken from the novel, may be helpful. At one point in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein is interested to examine the ways in which our language can create the impression that certain metaphysical entities, such as essence and spirit, exist. He considers ostensive definitions, which consist of pointing to something and then naming it. The image of Mrs Hunter dramatically pointing suggests a process of direct signification through ostention. This process, if it is to be effective, depends on our knowing what the gesture of pointing is for, and how it is intended to be viewed. He writes that "only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name" (*P.I.* sec. 31). In other words, we need already to have a language in order to understand this type of meaning-giving activity. Wittgenstein continues:

Suppose, however, someone were to object: 'It is not true that you must already be master of a language in order to understand an ostensive definition: all you need—of course!—is to know or guess what the person giving the explanation is pointing to. That is, whether for example to the shape of the object, or to its colour, or to its number, and so on.'—And what does this 'pointing to the shape', 'pointing to the colour' consist in? Point to a piece of paper.—And now point to its shape—now to its colour—now to its number (that sounds queer).—How did you do it?—You will say that you 'meant' a different thing each time you pointed. And if I ask how is that done, you will say you concentrated

your attention on the colour, the shape, etc. But I ask again: how is *that* done? (*P.I.* sec. 33).

He goes on to elaborate this point and concludes that

we do here what we do in a host of similar cases: because we cannot specify any *one* bodily action which we call pointing to the shape (as opposed, for example, to the colour), we say that a *spiritual* [mental, intellectual] activity corresponds to these words. Where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a *spirit* (*P.I.* sec. 36).

This pointing is the same as the pure originary experience that Derrida contests; a seeing "right down to the root of the matter." The problem is, as Wittgenstein shows, that this cannot have meaning only by virtue of itself. It must be given meaning by that which surrounds it. He argues that appealing to metaphysical notions gets us nowhere, and whether someone is pointing to colour or shape (the lineaments of being) for example, "would still depend on the circumstances—that is, on what happened before and after the pointing" (*P.I.* sec. 35). This "before and after" is the context in which the pointing takes place; it is like the language that must already be possessed in order for an understanding of ostensive defining to be possible. The thing itself cannot be seen, it can only show up *as* something in a scene, or a context. It inevitably has the quality of theatre. Mrs Hunter's pointing is not necessarily only meaningful in itself; it is an expression rather than a state, and as such it is extended rather than iconic.

Wittgenstein was interested in the relationship between language and the world. In criticising ostensive defining he was attacking a view which sees a simple connection between the two. He is arguing that not even in this case of an apparently clear language-world connection does language in fact operate in this way. Meaning spills beyond the confines of any such simple connection and can only be read against the background of a wider situation, or "language game," to use Wittgenstein's term. When we ask the question as to the meaning of Elizabeth Hunter's experience we must look beyond the isolated scene itself to its broader context. Elizabeth Hunter points to the scene of "transcendence" on Brumby Island. The meaning of this gesture is expressive; it is part of her form of life and, as we have seen, Elizabeth Hunter's form of life is pre-eminently theatrical. As a gesture it is expressive of impulsion and directionality; qualities which are

evident in the cyclone scene itself. In the images of the linesman and the impaled noddy, which gets her moving towards life, we see that within this still moment there is a covert thrust which directs its significance outward. Beyond the scene lies the menace of her children who threaten her life. The fuller meaning thus shows up as life-affirming rather than life-denying and fixes the focus of signification firmly in the scenes of contingent existence. As Wittgenstein suggests, the tendency to want to specify a transcendent significance is in reality grammatical rather than ontological.

An earlier scene in the novel which helps to show that a word such as "transcendence" is expressive rather than descriptive is one which concerns the death of Alfred Hunter, Elizabeth's husband. Alfred is a wealthy Hunter Valley grazier, and is in many ways the opposite of his wife in his kindness and selflessness. He is content to live on his country property supporting his wife's extravagant lifestyle carried on in a separate home in Sydney. Elizabeth receives a letter from Alfred's doctor informing her that her husband is dying of cancer. Stricken with guilt for her unfaithfulness she returns to "Kudjeri" to nurse Alfred in his final weeks of life. During this ordeal we are told that others

accused her of being cold. She was not: she was involved in a mystery so immense and so rarely experienced, she functioned, it could have been truthfully said, by reverence, in particular for this only in a sense, feebly fluttering soul, her initiator.

On the night, she was roused from her half-sleep, not by sounds of death in the next room, but by her instinct to participate in a miraculous transformation. She snatched her gown, and hurried in.

Here was this dear husband of her flesh still lying waiting for her, it appeared, to come to his bed. Only now, the fading eyes implied, it was she who must take the initiative.

Alfred dies, his last word "'Whyyy? ,'" then in

what remained of the night she spent mostly stumbling through a labyrinth of rooms . . . Motion saved her . . . For the time being she was neither widow, nor wife, not even a woman . . . For a moment or two she dipped her toes in hell, and made herself remember the bodies of men she had dragged to bed, to wrestle with: her 'lovers.'

Towards morning she caught sight of a reflection in a glass and was faced with her *Doppelgänger*: aged, dishevelled, ravaged, eyes staring inward, in the direction of a horizon which still had to be revealed (198).

This scene has been, like the "eye" scene, a recollection. Returning to the present, one of her nurses, Sister de Santis, asks her if she has been dreaming. "'Not dreaming – living,' Mrs Hunter gasped out" (199).

This, then, is another scene which has been given her to live. Then, still very much caught up in the passion of this memory, she recalls the experience of transcendence on Brumby Island.

The scene involving the death of her husband has certain points of similarity as well as difference when compared to the Island episode. There is a loss of identity—"she was neither widow, nor wife, not even a woman"—which, like the loss of identity in the cyclone scene where "she was no longer a body, least of all a woman," signifies some altered state of being. In the death scene "motion saved her," just as in the cyclone scene she is saved from the storm by the sight of the impaled gull which gets her moving towards her bunker. She looks at this gull at the bidding, not of her will, but, by implication, of her "diseased conscience which had taken over during the night from her defector will." "Conscience" is in itself an image of connectedness in that it is related to public forms of behaviour, while "will" suggests something innate. This conscience has been dwelling, during the storm, on her husband, his lawyer Arnold Wyburd, whom she seduces, and on her son whom she could not love or nourish as a mother. In a similar way it is her conscience which forces Elizabeth to face the suffering that her husband is enduring and to take on the job of nursing him till he dies. There is an inverse relationship between the two scenes also (as there is an inverse relationship between Elizabeth Hunter and Mitty Jacka, the latter being "initiated into the ways of darkness [235]). The death scene is characterised by darkness; by a "stumbling through a labyrinth of rooms." The cyclone scene is characterised by the opposite; an excess of light, of clear, pure vision, and dream-like movement, as well as confinement in one small room. The former scene is infernal—Elizabeth dips "her toes in hell"—while the latter offers a vision of heavenly peace and tranquillity, until the gull is encountered. Both scenes contain suggestions of transcendent localities, albeit at opposite ends of the metaphysical scale of human redemption.

Just before Elizabeth's recollection of this period of her life begins she lies dreaming in her bed. There, immersed in thought/dreams she reflects:

Oh the dreams with which the bottom of the sea is littered not always sodden like the old letters they will stand up in coral columns in whole cupolas and archways and long sculptural perspectives to confront entice you in where the daylight is solid and the expression in his eyes

at that time perhaps the first clue I ever had to what is transcendent (186).

Here we see the merging of the transcendent and the theatrical. The image of the bottom of the sea is suggestive of the plumbing of depths, while the references to cupolas, archways and perspectives hint at the scenic. These two are connected with transcendence. William J. Scheick argues that the ostensibly transcendent moments in White are in fact the plumbing of "the depths of existence" and that "the sea is a prevalent image in White's works for conveying the nature of existence."¹⁴ This section is reminiscent of the eye scene where Elizabeth is in a solidly lit "jewel of light" surrounded by "columns of cloud, its walls hung with vaporous balconies" (409). We see here once more a theatre of transcendence being enacted, the meaning extending into the protracted scene, rather than being located at the core of things. The idea of a core of essential reality is subsumed in the scenic quest-process which has a theatrical quality.

She remembers the expression in her husband's eyes at the time of his death, which was the first clue she had "ever had to what is transcendent" (186). What these fading eyes tell her is that "it was she who must take the initiative" (198). The moment of transcendence here, as in the cyclone scene, points to movement and to action as well as to an affirmation of life and existence directed towards "a horizon which still had to be revealed." We see that whatever "transcendence" is taken to mean, here it is caught up in the flow of existence. Its meaning extends into the scenes of human life that surround the transcendent episodes. Thus what we get here is a structure of significance which has the character of a seeing-as, inasmuch as the "object of sight" subsists in a relationship of scenic parts. A dramatic whole subsumes these ostensibly iconic moments; a whole which comes to be seen as the total self-expression of Elizabeth Hunter.

Elizabeth Hunter, in the scene just analysed, stumbles through a labyrinth in the darkness symbolically leaving the enclosing form of a secure marriage and entering the flow of becoming. The relationship of the contingent and the absolute is here *enacted* in a dramatic scene.

¹⁴ William J. Scheick, 'The Gothic Grace and Rainbow Aesthetic of Patrick White's Fiction: An Introduction,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 21, 1 (Spring, 1979), 141.

In the same way, Basil only ever enacts the ultimate, or attempts to do so in his efforts to master the role of Lear. At one point he meets the enigmatic Mitty Jacka and they discuss the theatre. She tells him that she doesn't go to see plays often

'because it exhausts and irritates me to watch a set of cast-iron figures trying to drag their weight around in a disintegrated world. Since our conglomerate existence became less conglomerate, less controllable, more fluid, how can we express, or become part of it, unless we flow too, by giving – or losing – ourselves "essentially"?'

Cock, he resisted answering; I have been able to control my own life ever since I learnt the technique of living, which is also the technique of acting; . . . But what she had said stimulated him to the extent that he would have been tempted to flow with the darkness and the rain, and beyond them, if she was prepared to show him how (234).

Mitty Jacka leaves him a note which reads "an actor tends to ignore the part which fits him best *his life* Lear the old unplayable is in the end a safer bet than the unplayed I" (238), and she gives him her opinion that:

'A man develops only one of his several potential lives. There's no reason why he shouldn't live them all – or at least act them out, if he can liberate himself. This is what I'd like for you: this nightly liberation instead of the cast-iron figures dragging themselves from one prescribed attitude to another' (241).

Mitty's note contains a reference to being and becoming, the former suggested by "part" and the latter by "*his life*." The part or role is a fixed form, suggested in two of the meanings of the word "cast"—to fit into a pre-existent form, and the list of roles in a play. This fixity is the essence of the concept of being. The allusion to life suggests becoming as that which is not finally formed but which is in process of coming to be—the "unplayed I." Mitty's note thus encompasses the Nietzschean injunction, to become what one is, and here it is tied specifically to the theatre. The conflation of "part" with "life" has the effect of reducing essence to accident, or rather, of abolishing the distinction between the two. Here becoming—the "unplayed I"—appears *as* being—the "part which fits." It is thus being as *role* rather than absolute form. Thus Mitty's note also does away with the separation of appearance and reality; another of the metaphysical dichotomies mentioned earlier. The conflation of "part" and "life" once again blurs these ostensibly distinct ideas.

Basil has been confined by roles and by the adoption of theatrical technique. These are "the cages," in particular the role of Lear with

which he has been wrestling. Within this role he is "inside a chosen cage," which "communicated, but hints of steel nudged the fantasy of possible escape" (499). Gazing into a river "he could see his face, when he dared look, at the other end of this tunnel of light," an image suggestive of the confinement within existence as well as within a role. The theatrical in *The Eye of the Storm* mimics the ultimate. It represents the attempt to impose form on the inchoate flow of existence. Basil's roles are at one with the techniques of life; in other words, with set forms of behaviour which ape the stasis of being. As is the case with his mother, Basil's identity is played out in a way that denies access to the infinite. He is caught up in a theatre of the self. The attempt to master the role of "Lear the old unplayable" is an attempt to reach the absolute by assuming the form of an absolute role.

Here it is instructive to consider the relationship between Elizabeth Hunter and Mitty Jacka. The former is "a *grande dame* descending the stairs;" one who "was always on the stairs, in an inexhaustible wardrobe, white for preference" (128), while the latter "was standing on the step, an archaic figure in the black gown she had gathered around her with her arms, her face an expressionless white, except for a grey shadow of what could have been anxiety" (241). Both of these women are here theatrically conceived with attention directed to lighting, posture, costume and expression. The two are in many ways opposites. Basil is trapped by his mother; she is the ultimate cage which her son imagines as "the belly of a spiritual whale" which "would not spew him out till she died, and perhaps not even then" (501), while Mitty Jacka urges him to break free. Ultimately he cannot, and he and his sister are confined together on the "shuddering rack" (508) of their mother's bed. Elizabeth Hunter here appears as the embodiment of controlling form, or being, while Mitty Jacka embodies becoming. These two conflate, as we see in the scene at the latter's house where, after Basil has told her of his childhood illness, "he was no longer aware of her as a face but as a smile beneath water. What else he told he could not have unravelled for sleep in a white dress streaming light from the top of the stairs" (238). They are the Janus face of the theatrical mask. Basil, is thus caught in a state of betweenness; enmeshed in the tension between being and becoming.

Later in the novel, as Basil and his sister visit their childhood home "Kudjeri," he is left alone next to a dam. He decides to take off his shoes and paddle while at the same time performing to an invisible audience. This whole episode has a theatrical quality; a sense of an enclosing space and audience. We are told that "the empty sky was staring at him," and that "around him the silence was watching." He stands in the dam "as the circles widened around him on the muddy water" while "the silence burning into his skin was the applause he valued." We are reminded of Stan Parker in *The Tree of Man* amid the circles of the ultimate. However, here the circles are the parameters of the stage space which mimic the spheres of the absolute. The scene is lit in a way that suggests stage lighting: "the light now streaming over the eroded ridge was her same glistening white, still blinding him" (474-476). Basil is thus contained, at once, within a theatrical space and within his mother—the "stage" lighting is *her* light.

Thus illuminated by a maternal light he sees his mother's hand: an "illusory claw," which beckons him on "walking not so steady on his Shakespeare legs' when "the Thing . . . rose up out of the mud under Sir Basil's right sole" (476). Wounded, and his performance disrupted, he is left to reflect on "his own superfluosness" (477). When he had taken off his shoes before paddling, he had regarded his bare feet and reflected that while they had been "formed by generations walking in the furrow behind the plough and sticking their toes into stirrup irons," they had "become useless, except to stride imagined miles around a stage; incapable of trudging the actual miles to Dover. Perhaps this was why he had failed as Lear" (475). This "Thing" is the sign of the contingent and accidental which, by injuring Basil's foot and thus foregrounding his inability to walk, points to his failure in the role of Lear, and thus to the inaccessibility of the ultimate. He remains inevitably within theatrical confines. Here, as he is blinded by his mother's light and lured on to disaster we see that Basil's becoming is at once revealed and thwarted in the theatrical space of the dam by his mother's being. We see Basil's becoming as bounded; as contained within an articulating space.

Earlier, after his first visit to his mother, blinding light had brought about the same effect. Sister de Santis watches him leave the house.

The moon had revived in the wake of the storm, but rode the sky groggily. From the house the garden below appeared a muzz of frond and shadow threaded with the serpentine path. Down the path the figure of a man was tentatively advancing, unequally weighted by a suitcase in one hand, an overnight bag and briefcase in the other. Sir Basil was made to look older than when she had first met him at the gate

Down in the street the illuminated taxi was waiting for its passenger, its lights too brash beside the insinuating glimmer from the moon. Approaching the taxi's beacon, Sir Basil could have been dazzled by it. At a turn in the path, where an abrupt flight of steps spoiled its serpentine flow, he put his foot in a pool of darkness, and began to topple. The bags completed his unbalance. He fell right over into a border of heliotrope and thyme under one of the smirking broken-fingered statues.

Sister de Santis shoved the window as far open as it would go. She leaned out – to do what, she couldn't for the moment conceive, though in her mind she was already bent over the body examining it for injuries. Wasn't it part of her job? But her efficiency might have suffered from the scents of the garden. The heavy air was making her breathe too deeply; she could feel the sill cutting into her as she leaned out over the remembered face, from which she had banished any sign of disillusion or dissipation (148).

Here can be seen the conflation of a role and the flow of "the unplayed I." The latter is here suggested in the "serpentine flow" of the path, while the former is seen in Basil's slapstick performance. This is a theatrical scene with Mary de Santis as the audience watching, as if from the balcony, the brightly illuminated stage with its scenery of "heliotrope and thyme" and "smirking broken-fingered statues."

This scene dramatises the relationship between being and becoming in the theatrical. Basil can only be seen *as* that which he is. His attempt to enter Mitty Jacka's "absolute," here figured in the pool of darkness, inevitably issues into a comic theatrical routine—the "arse over tip." Basil is unable to leave the confines of his being as an actor and stumbles when giving himself to the unformed flow of becoming. Later he reflects that "if ever you thought they were about to help you open a door into the truth, you found, instead of a lighted room, a dark void you hadn't the courage to enter" (258). The absolute suggested here in idea of "the truth" is, in this scene, realised as part of a theatrical performance. Thus here, and in the incident in the dam, Basil is unable to leave the enclosure of his adopted roles; his being, and embrace this flow. His is a desire for a pure present in which he could exist in a state "neither remembering the past, nor plotting the uncooperative future, simply being" (142). The whole is contained within the "theatre of reunion" between Basil and his mother. Basil's

containment is ultimately that within a total theatrical situation operating as a metaphor of existence. It is a situation which none of those involved therein can transcend.

Sister de Santis is also drawn into this play of being and becoming. Her being; her job as a nurse, is ruptured by the flow of becoming—her becoming sensuality—here represented by the "scents of the garden;" the same garden through which runs the serpentine path. After the actor's departure:

Paradox and heresy mingled with the night scents and sickroom smells . . . She was forced to invent insignificant jobs, to prove to herself she had not lapsed from the faith which necessity and her origins made the only possible one (150).

The nurse's work, which she imagines performing on the fallen body of the actor, "was her life" (324). However, she senses "that the visible ramifications of her work were no more than a convenient *trompe l'œil* to distract attention from that shadowy labyrinth strewn with signs through which she approached 'happiness'." The "shadowy labyrinth" of the garden path has toppled Basil, and the nurse in imagining herself performing her duties engages in something that has the character of a role; of a "*trompe l'œil*." Beneath both their roles there lies this labyrinth, a maze which ensnares them more surely than any acted part may. It is, in fact, the labyrinth of existence itself. We are reminded of the "labyrinth of rooms" through which Elizabeth Hunter stumbles on the night of her husband's death, ending in the unrevealed horizon of becoming seen in the mirror as she confronts herself in the role of ravaged mourner. Once more Lotte's *Tingeltangel*; her "drunkenness," entangles them.

This is seen in another episode during the visit of Basil and his sister Dorothy to "Kudjeri." Basil enters an old shed in which is stored his father's car. This represents, as in the earlier dam scene, a reliving of childhood pleasures; an attempt at a return to origins. The scene is lent a theatrical air at the outset as "instead of the door a curtain of spangled light hung protecting the secrets of the cavern beyond" (487). While rummaging around he comes across an old boot and, driven by an obscure urge, puts it on—he "was determined to wear it." In doing this he "was not handicapped more than he already knew: he could

have been wearing this same unnatural boot on his walk to Dover" (487-488). The boot is thus a concomitant of the role of Lear; a theatrical property. However, in wearing it, he is as effectively crippled as he was when he trod on the "Thing" in the dam. The boot thus forms part of a chain of images signifying the inevitability of the accidental which denies the ultimate.

His sister enters the shed and is horrified when she discovers that he is wearing this deformed object. Basil tries to get it off, but it won't budge: "a natural deformity could not have stuck closer" (491). The boot is a sign of the contingent and the accidental, and is a part of Basil; of his Being. It is, like the "Thing" in the dam's mud, an unexpected object, it is something "he could not remember noticing on other visits" (487). It disrupts a performance within an enclosed space entered through a curtain of light. Both boot and "Thing" belong to the realm of the unplayed I and form part of a pattern, along with Basil's stumble as he leaves his mother's house on the night of their reunion, of an inability to enter the flow of becoming. Dorothy desperately attempts to tear the boot free; "her long fragile nails ran skittering tearing over the surface of the mildewed leather; as the Hunter children fought for their self-justification and freedom from awfulness" (492). Awfulness is, as this novel vividly illustrates, a part of existence: they will never be free of it. They attempt, in the effort to remove the boot, to rid themselves of that which threatens imposed forms; here his inability to play the role of Lear.

Both "Thing" and boot are connected with Basil's parents. He is lured on by his mother's beckoning claw to tread on the mysterious object in the mud, and the boot is associated with his father as it lies in shadow close to the old Bentley. David Kelly argues that the return to "Kudjeri" is an attempt to "forego" the "full acting-out of Basil's self"¹⁵ in the non play which Mitty Jacka urges him to write. However, both the episodes at the dam and in the shed are part of the "theatre of reunion" that Basil engages in on his return to Australia. Thus theatrical form surrounds the entire action of the novel and operates as a metaphor of the enclosure within existence of all the characters.

¹⁵ David Kelly, 'The Structure of the Eye of the Storm,' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*, eds., R. Shepherd and K. Singh (Adelaide: The Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978), 62.

Basil's attempt to enter the flow of becoming-into-the-absolute becomes a theatrical performance. He cannot transcend the theatre, either in a literal sense, or in the sense that the theatrical operates as a metaphor of the enclosure within existence. White is concerned, in these and other episodes, to delineate the tension between being and becoming and thus to explore what it means to be.

Such enclosed episodes as I have discussed seem to convey an intensified meaning content. This is because they enfold a core of meaning and present it to consciousness. They seem to embody, in their structure, form itself. For example, the "eye" scene has an enclosing structure, in the very nature of the cyclone itself. It thus seems to carry a heightened significance; one which because it is enclosed and cut off from the world, suggests something transcendent. I have argued that this significance depends on the scene being resolved into its before and after. The scene-as-form is ruptured and its meaning extended into the completely worldly scene which surrounds it. This enclosing cannot, in my view, be seen as including in its structure the lineaments of absolute form; it is rather theatrical, and thus rhetorical, in its enclosing nature. The "eye" scene is metonymic, being contiguous with the theatrically conceived "murder" scene, rather than a discrete moment of iconic revelation.

Meaning in the novel is not to be located in such ostensibly enclosing revelatory episodes. It is never neatly coralled in luminous moments, but is extended throughout the text along lines, or threads. Much of the novel's meaning attaches to two threads in particular: those relating to intention and identity. The "eye" scene can be viewed as exhibiting a pattern of identity-loss followed by a transformational episode in which identity is regained, albeit in a modified form. This scene is, in turn, triggered by the intentions of Basil—"short, sharp, and material" (123)—and Dorothy, to eliminate their mother. This intention is bound up with the identities of the two siblings. It is a quest for a sense of identity that guides them, but an identity which escapes the confines of limit structures. Just as their mother

would have given anything to open a box containing the sum total of expectancy, but . . . she must expect her answers outside boxes, in the colder contingencies preparing for her (98).

Elizabeth's impulse to act, and adopt many roles, is motivated by the realisation that she "must take many other shapes before I finally set, or before I am, more probably, shattered" (98-99).

Basil wants his share of his mother's money, available on her death, to finance a play; one not yet written, but which will be largely improvised. Basil, describing it to a fellow actor, says that it will consist of "my life, more or less. Acted out with a company of actors. According to how we – the actors and audience – choose, it could go this way or that – as life can – and does" (135). Like his mother he desires to seek his true identity amid the cold contingencies of life, beyond the boxes of roles that scripted plays provide him with. Dorothy despairs that "*I have never managed to escape being this thing Myself*" (48). She wants her share of the money so that she can live independently, away from a world in which she "suspected she existed only in the novels of Balzac and Stendhal and Flaubert, the plays of Racine" (53). In other words, she desires to establish her own identity beyond any formal structure. Although "if only she could have remained in permanent control of her de Lascabanes technique she might have rivalled Basil as an actor, or a hoax" (279).

The interesting thing here is that identity represents a movement *away* from controlling form. It is a movement into the flux, beyond the limits of the knowable; something directed towards "a horizon which still had to be revealed" (198). Identity as unity has always been seen as the result of the imposition of form on the flux of matter. Henry Staten in *Wittgenstein and Derrida* writes that:

In all its manifestations, form is the transphenomenal boundary of the phenomenon by virtue of which the phenomenon becomes accessible to knowledge. It is the common element in thing, thought, and word that makes them able to line up with each other in truth. Thus form is, as Derrida says, the form of presence, of the accessibility to the knower of the known (10).

Identity, as seen in this novel, often denies the imposition of metaphysical form and assumes instead a rhetorical form-as-theatre. As I have argued earlier, the "eye" scene is thrown up by Elizabeth Hunter as a defence against the threat posed by her children; a threat made in response to their need to find an independent identity. This scene contains images relating to Elizabeth's loss of identity, followed

by a regaining of identity through a confrontation with an image of suffering; the impaled noddly. This reminds her that she will not die until she is intended to. In a sense this thwarts the intention of her children, since she dies at home by an act of her own will, before a vacancy arises at the Thorogood Village. Meanwhile, the Hunter children have returned to their childhood home, where "their relationship had grown dovetailed" (500). At "Kudjeri" Basil finds himself "in the belly of a spiritual whale: unlike Jonah's, his would not spew him out till she died, and perhaps not even then" (501). He makes incestuous love with Dorothy in their mother's bed; the site of their respective conceptions, where they "go before her, bones broken by their convulsions on this shuddering rack" (508). They are forced to admit that their love is, like the landscape "beautiful – but sterile" (509). Elizabeth, through her resistance, has forced them into an acknowledgement of their enclosure by their mother; of the subsumation of their identities in hers. However, this is, as the dam and shed episodes show, in fact a subsumation within theatrical form rather than a Freudian enfolding by the mother. Thus lying behind the action is a theatrical play of identity. The Heideggerean notion that being is a characteristic of identity, and not vice versa, is apparent here.

The intertwined thread of identity and intention runs throughout the novel, linking what are ostensibly unrelated images. An episode involving Elizabeth Hunter's principal nurse, Mary de Santis, illustrates this point. In this scene, Sister de Santis goes to visit Basil after she has been told that he and his sister intend to put their mother into a home. Her intention, in turn, is to "appeal to him to consider the distress he's in danger of causing his mother" (296). However, she has become infatuated with the famous actor and an undercurrent of frustrated sexual desire clouds her noble intention from the start. Her intention is closely bound up with her identity as a nurse: as someone who is devoted to Mrs Hunter and who prides herself on her professionalism and dedication. Mary visits the actor in his hotel and he invites her to have a drink with him, followed by lunch at a harbour-side restaurant. She never gets to the point of fulfilling her intention, because her identity is threatened and undermined by lustful impulses which "she would scarcely have believed she had given way to" (339). This, and a sense of the sordidness of their surroundings, defeats her resolve.

Now too, in the context of slovenliness and apathy presented by the half-deserted restaurant, she knew she would never find the strength or opportunity to bear witness to her true faith and plead for the one who was also, incidentally, Elizabeth Hunter (339-340).

Basil is affected too, and he tries to ward off despondency by assuming a role, the Master of Santiago. He declaims a speech from the play, but fails as "he no longer had the power" (340). His identity as an actor is threatened. The mood of despair is intensified as they catch sight of the rotting corpse of a strangled dog, the wire still around its neck, which has washed ashore just below where they are sitting. Basil reacts hysterically. His most renowned feature: that which represents most fully his identity as an actor, we are told, is his voice. However, faced with the dead dog "he screeched, like an old parrot . . . its tongue stuck out, hard and blue" (341). Mary, in turn, feels "a nameless anguish" begin "seeping," and together they leave the restaurant, intention and identity both shattered by the horrifying image of death and suffering that they have been faced with.

The morning following this scene, as Basil awakes "without any feeling of guilt," he reflects that "that scene at the water's edge, searing though it was at the time, could have been sharpening his intentions, steeling his will" (345). He then makes a start on his play and writes a couple of scenes. He writes himself; his "true" identity, which is connected directly with the "murder" of his mother. In one scene a woman appears; the mysterious Mitty Jacka, who had given him the idea for this play along with the suggestion that he could do something about financing it by speeding up the demise of his ageing mother. She tells him that "that's a start. But you're still only telling the truth about other people." He replies, "give me a chance, won't you? I'm only beginning," and she says that "it ought to be easier after you've done the murder. It ought to flow" (347).

The image of the strangled dog connects with the image of the impaled noddy, not just because they resemble each other as images of imposed suffering, but because they both lie on the same intertwined thread of meaning which mediates the words "intention" and "identity." Both images, in a sense, undermine one intention while, at the same time, initiating and promoting another. The strangled dog is

the culmination of those scenic elements which, together with lust, combine to defeat Mary de Santis's intention of pleading for her patient. At the same time as it undermines Basil's identity as an actor, through the reduction of his impressive voice to a screech, it prompts his writing of the play which consists of "himself," which constructs a new identity. However it is an identity which is open-ended and not confined to form. It also steels his will and sharpens his intentions of getting rid of his mother, a task which is intimately connected to the play that he writes elaborating "the unplayed I" (238). It is Mitty Jacka, the counterpart to Elizabeth Hunter, who urges Basil to write his own life and get rid of his mother. This is an assertion of his identity; both in the writing and in the escape from "the belly of a spiritual whale."

Basil's intention is related inversely to Mary's. The dog image operates as a kind of switch changing the flow of meaning across the text. Basil's reinforced intention leads him and his sister to their bedside confrontation with Elizabeth in the episode in which the "eye" scene is imbedded. The image of the impaled gull operates as another switch in this field of meaning, thwarting the intention of Basil and Dorothy by steeling their mother's will to resist them; to not die till it is "intended." (Intention here is Elizabeth's-intention; she imposes form-as-intention through strength of will. It is this form which encloses her children and which is the spiritual whale's belly that entraps Basil.) Both images are thus part of a continuum of meaning. Any, as it were, vertically directed meaning within these images is subsumed in the more compelling horizontal current which flows across the text. Meaning and identity are thus played out—*performed*—in a theatrical sense. The characters are caught up and entangled in this scenic flow; one in which Mary de Santis says that "you're no longer altogether a person: more like an electric bulb going on and off" (203). This flow is the flow of existence, which White is fundamentally concerned to write. The iconic moment of revelation in the enclosed form of the image-as-being is undercut by the impulsive dramatic flow of the human situations.

Here we see a relationship worked out between intention and identity, in which both appear as aspects of form: "the transphenomenal boundary of the phenomenon," in the previously quoted words of Henry Staten. Form as intention and identity is

consistently ruptured by the existential flow. Form can be imagined as predetermination. For example Wittgenstein considers the case of an order to complete a numerical sequence according to a particular formula. He writes:

Here I should first of all like to say: your idea was that that act of meaning the order had in its own way already traversed all those steps: that when you meant it your mind as it were flew ahead and took all the steps before you physically arrived at this or that one.

Thus you were inclined to use such expressions as: "The steps are really already taken, even before I take them in writing or orally or in thought." And it seemed as if they were in some unique way predetermined, anticipated—as only the act of meaning can anticipate reality (*P.I.* sec. 188).

"All the steps are really already taken" means: I no longer have any choice. The rule, once stamped with a particular meaning, traces the lines along which it is to be followed through the whole of space (*P.I.* sec. 219).

One of the prevailing aspects of form used in *The Eye of the Storm* is theatre-as-form. The script and the stage, like Wittgenstein's rules and orders, offers an illusion of controlling form imposed on the formless flux of reality. Basil's intention to write a play based on "the unplayed I" is an attempt to rupture the set script of controlling form. Throughout the novel there are enclosing images which suggest the presence of form. The "eye" scene is the most obvious. It can be seen that it is connected to other episodes in the novel, and thus the form it embodies is ruptured as its significance spills beyond its boundaries into the scenes of life which surround it. Within this privileged sphere itself there lies, in the image of the impaled gull, the sign of chaos and accident, which infects the pure moment with the corruption of contingent reality. This "threatens the principle of being and of knowability;"¹⁶ thus Mrs Hunter lies in her bunker upon her return in a state of blindness.

Basil seeks to protect himself with "technique" (234), a device which fails him in the restaurant scene. This too represents controlling form, a form which is ruptured by the image of the dead dog. Sister de Santis in her role as nurse can be seen to embody an idea of controlling form. We see this in the passage quoted earlier in which the nurse watches Basil leave his mother's house and stumble and fall. Mary de Santis imagines an activity in line with her role as a nurse, but

¹⁶ See Staten, 16.

these steps which are "really already taken" are disrupted by the "scents of the garden." Here, as in the later restaurant scene, sensuality, the mark of contingent reality, of the flux, ruptures the controlling form. The link between her in the earlier scene where she leans out of the window to watch Basil fall on the darkened path, and the fat woman who leans out of a window displaying "the cleavage in the plump form above the pink chenille," and lets "it be understood she was on for a joke, the dirtier the better" (330), during their meeting at his hotel reinforces this idea. This disruption continues as they talk together and as:

One half of her lumbered with a heavy sincerity she knew to be her own, the other was feeling its way into a groove faintly remembered, in which she hoped to glide with the same aluminium brightness as some of the women at those dinner parties Elizabeth Hunter had given during her convalescence (332).

This faintly remembered groove with its theatrical quality of "aluminium brightness" partakes of the quality of the role-as-form. The nurse remains, as is suggested in the link between her and the woman in pink chenille, inevitably within the screened ambit of the theatre in which is played out this tension between being and becoming.

In *The Eye of the Storm* White contests the modernist project of iconic revelation; of "the quest for the essential image."¹⁷ The idea that fiction can erect structures which afford a glimpse of the essence of things is combatted in the tension which exists in this novel between those ostensibly transcendent moments and the rhetoric of theatre, which I have argued, runs through the text at a much more profound level than the merely incidental. The conditions of vision in existence are thus foregrounded in this novel. Mary de Santis at the end of the novel is "entirely free" (586), yet she is "possessed" (589) by the light, and finally sees herself reflected, not in the speculum of essential reality, but "in Elizabeth Hunter's looking glass." Though she adheres to an active belief in "perpetual becoming" (11) she is held within a controlling form which assumes the character of being. Contained both by the frame of the mirror and the blinding possessive light she is subsumed into the theatrical space of the deceased woman. She feels

¹⁷ See Thiher, 4.

the need "to escape from this prism of dew and light." The light, however, is not an instrument of illumination, but of possession, of *imprism*-ment. Her becoming is measured by her dual betrayal of Mrs Hunter (her failure to speak for the old woman in the nurse's meeting with Basil, and her wearing the outrageous orange turban to her employer's funeral). Elizabeth Hunter thus stands as a kind of backdrop or frame allowing Mary to be seen as that which she is. In embodying both being and becoming in her theatricality, the old woman is both a fully realised character and a metaphor of the ungrounded quality of existence itself.

Chapter 3

The Clueless Maze

Both philosophy and literary theory have rendered the relationship between fiction and reality problematic in many ways. The Cartesian model of an autonomous subject who views the world as an objective reality that is radically separate from itself and whose relationship to this external world of objects is mediated by and derived from its relationship to itself has been attacked on many fronts. The locus of certainty and truth was, for Descartes, the autonomous self and much of the philosophy which followed Descartes "becomes a *philosophy of the subject*."¹ There has been a similar focus on the nature of the self in fiction, particularly modernist fiction, culminating in the stream-of-consciousness method. Descartes believed that objects were utterly separate from the self. Later, Immanuel Kant argued that the subject's knowledge of the objective world is a result, in part, of the activity of the subject itself, and was not merely a subjective reflection on objects "out there." Kant maintained that the nature of this objective sphere is based on the nature of the subject. This is because the subject brings to its apprehension of the world certain categories of understanding and forms of intuition such as, space and time, cause and effect, substance and accident, and existence and non-existence. These categories and forms are *a priori*, existing before any experience of the world.

The twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger took this much further. The subject, he said, was not worldless or a pure mental point that confronts objects in a world that is radically separate from it, or linked through *a priori* categories and forms. The subject is always already in a world as a characteristic of its being or existence. By "in" he means to dwell, or to inhabit. Thus there is no split between a subject and objects. Rather, the subject-object split is a

¹ Mark C. Taylor ed., *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3.

way of seeing reality that is determined by the a priori condition of Being-in-the-world that characterises the existence of a human being. The entity which is in a world is not a subject at all, it is "Dasein."² Heidegger, in his principal work, *Being and Time*, analyses Dasein and sees it as being characterised by a number of broad qualities. He calls these qualities existentials, and they are modes of existence which reveal what it means to be. They are all a priori, and therefore do not describe human behaviour, which is always apprehended a posteriori. Rather, they describe the conditions by which the various types of human behaviour and outlook are possible. Heidegger is the thinker, par excellence, of existence, and his thought is directed to the question of what it means to be.

I want to argue that Patrick White is, particularly in his later novels, primarily a writer of existence, and that his thought is, like Heidegger's, directed to the question of what it means to be. The ideas of Martin Heidegger thus serve as a useful point of comparison with some features of White's later fiction, and in particular with certain features of *A Fringe of Leaves*. In line with Heidegger I want to argue that White is attempting in this novel to grasp a sense of a condition, prior to any particular experience, which may be compared to the existential Being-in-the-world. He is, in a sense, attacking the same ideas that Heidegger (as well as Wittgenstein and Derrida) did. These include the phenomenalist notion that the self, or the autonomous, sovereign consciousness embodied in the self, is the ultimate locus of certainty and truth. In White's portrait of Ellen Roxburgh (as in his presentation of Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm*) can be detected a self-structure which renders problematic the concept of grounded certainty in either the inner or outer spheres. "Reality," in being non-absolute, and therefore not embodying an in-itself or an as-such, must be rendered in a non-absolute way—a way that I characterise as the theatrical. The problem, and the key to its elusive nature, is the fact that representation is always dependent on the attempt to re-present an in-itself.

The theatrical comes to stand for a way between the "real" and the fluctuating. An incident from *A Fringe of Leaves* illustrates this point.

² See *Being and Time*, 27.

After the foundering of the "Bristol Maid" Austin Roxburgh goes in search of his Elzevir Virgil. His wife Ellen is left alone in their cabin where:

It was the greatest luxury to be sitting alone, to give up the many-faceted role she had been playing, it now seemed, with mounting intensity in recent months – of loyal wife, tireless nurse, courageous woman, and more unreal than any of the superficial, taken-for-granted components of this character – expectant mother. Yet her body told her that this child was the truest part of her, of such an incontrovertible truth that she had not admitted it to the company of those 'formed' thoughts, affectations, and hypocrisies recorded in her journal, just as she had banned from its pages another, more painful truth – herself as compliant adulteress.

A reality accepted might have left her less detached had she not felt fulfilled, and had she been reared besides, on the realities: she was still to some extent a lump of a country girl, chapped hands folded in her lap, seated on a rock amongst furze and husssocks in a failing light. In the ordinary sequence of events someone would have come courting the farmer's daughter, and got her with child and to church, in that order.

Mrs Roxburgh stirred on her bench. In her thoughts she was torn between reality and actuality. On breaking the sequence of events and spiriting her away, her preceptors had attempted in all good faith to foist what they recognised as a mind on the farmer's daughter (156-157).

What is the difference between reality and actuality here? We are told that Ellen was raised "on the realities," and these are connected to the image of her seated on a rock with folded hands in the gloaming. This image has a particularly static quality, as if we were looking at a painting or a photograph—it appears to be posed. The term "reality" in the contrasting phrase "reality and actuality" points back to this static image, and also to "the ordinary sequence of events" described. These are forms of behaviour having as a fundamental characteristic, determinability. This formal pattern parallels the formal image of the seated girl. We can thus see that "reality" here partakes of the characteristics of being. This is contrasted to "actuality," and this word, in the above mentioned phrase, points forward to the rupturing of the forms of being; to the "breaking [of] the sequence of events." This inaugurates her search for a meaning and identity. In other words, "actuality" can here be seen as analogous to becoming. Seen thus the "truest part of her" is not an essential self, but that part of her which appropriates becoming most closely, and which denies the stasis of essence and being. It is this: her "role" as expectant mother which is the most "unreal," or in other words, the most actual. All the roles she adopts are a part of her actuality, or her becoming. However, they are also forms, and as such partake of the quality of being. Thus Ellen is

"*torn* between reality and actuality" (italics mine) with the theatrical roles embodying the tension between being and becoming. It is the Kierkegaardian spacing of existence which is suggested in the fact that Mrs Roxburgh is "*torn between* reality and actuality" (italics mine). It is precisely this condition of between-ness that gives rise to the roles she plays in that this between-ness creates the space in which identities show up as roles.

Ellen here occupies a position that is analogous to Kierkegaard's existing individual who is enclosed in a medium he cannot transcend. He contends that:

For the existing person, existing is for him his highest interest, and his interestedness in existing is his actuality. What actuality is cannot be rendered in the language of abstraction. Actuality is an *inter-esse* [between-being] between thinking and being in the hypothetical unity of abstraction (C.U.P. 314).

This condition of enclosedness is seen by Kierkegaard as a spacing:

The systematic idea is subject-object, is the unity of thinking and being; existence, on the other hand, is precisely the separation. From this it by no means follows that existence is thoughtless, but existence has spaced and does space subject from object, thought from being (C.U.P. 123).

This does not contradict Heidegger since here truth, as the agreement of subject and object, is denied by the spacing of these two by existence, or Being-in-the-world. Existence creates a space, and this space may be compared, in its denial of access to the absolute, to the space of the theatrical. It is not itself an entity, neither subject nor object, but rather "the spacing that holds apart" (C.U.P. 118). This spacing gives rise to a condition in which things show up *as* that which they are; in other words, they show up as *roles*. Thus we do not see a subject distinct from a world or a setting. We see rather a unitary rhetorical structure enabling being to show up *as* such. Inasmuch as being shows up, unity, or what Kierkegaard calls "the systematic" (C.U.P. 118), will be denied. This does not lead to the creation of dichotomies since dichotomy is the contrast of two separate unities.

Commentators have tended to see *A Fringe of Leaves* as constituting a change in White's fiction. Veronica Brady, for example, detects the beginnings of a movement away from the transcendent,

starting in *The Eye of the Storm*, and brought to full realisation in the later novel. It is a movement away from "the imaginary" towards that which "is present and pressing."³ This is a view endorsed by John Colmer who writes that *A Fringe of Leaves* is "the first of White's novels to recognize that men and women are social animals who cannot cut themselves off from society if they are to achieve wholeness of being."⁴ Alan Lawson, in charting perceived changes in White's fiction, contends that while some see a change in *The Vivisector* and others detect a new direction in *The Eye of the Storm*, "for even more critics the changes began with *A Fringe of Leaves* with its concern with beatitude rather than apocalypse, with a return to ordinary life."⁵ Laurence Steven informs us that White "recognizes that the symbolist route is no solution unless the symbolism is firmly rooted in human experience. The terms of this recognition are what White explores so fruitfully in *A Fringe of Leaves*."⁶ Manfred Mackenzie sees a different emphasis and writes that "White rediscovers what Hawthorne discovered, that 'the valid rite of initiation for the individual in the new world is not an initiation *into* society, but, given the character of society, an initiation *away from* it.'"⁷ Although he does concede that there is an initiation into native society in *A Fringe of Leaves*. I would agree that this shift towards the social represents a movement away from transcendent concerns, and I would add that it may be seen as affirmation that there is in this novel something that can be characterised by the Heideggerean term Being-in-the-world. I would argue that a more fundamental change—beginning in *The Eye of the Storm*—is carried through in this novel. It is what lies behind this change in emphasis that I wish to explore.

This emphasis on society can be seen in the novel's opening chapter. However, it is society viewed as in a carefully arranged performance. One commentator has seen this scene as "a cliché from drawing-room comedies."⁸ This establishes the novel's "essential

³ Veronica Brady, 'A Fringe of Leaves: Civilization by the Skin of Our Own Teeth,' *Southerly*, 2 (1977), 124.

⁴ 'The Quest Motif in Patrick White,' 204.

⁵ 'Meaning and Experience: A Review-Essay on Some Recurrent Problems in Patrick White Criticism,' 293.

⁶ *Dissociation and Wholeness in Patrick White's Fiction*, 3.

⁷ Manfred Mackenzie, 'Tradition and Patrick White's Individual Talent,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 20, 2 (Summer, 1979), 164.

⁸ Zulfikar Ghose, 'The One Comprehensive Vision,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 21, 2 (Summer, 1979), 262.

fictionality,"⁹ that is, we are offered a viewing point; ushered into a theatre. This opening scene takes place within an enclosed space; the carriage which conveys the Merivales and Miss Scrimshaw away from Circular Quay where they have just farewelled the Roxburghs. This carriage constitutes "its own world" (16). These contained characters are, at the end of their scene, "minor actors who have spoken a prologue;" the carriage then conveys them "off into the wings" (21). The first exchange between these "actors" has to do with the subject of duty. It is this same subject which rounds off the novel as a whole with Ellen's statement that she had, in urging Chance's pardon, done her "duty . . . by everyone" (361), and perhaps also in, apparently, accepting Mr Jevons as her husband. They go on to discuss issues which are taken up in the body of the novel. These have to do with suffering and the desire to reach the "ultimate in experience" (17). The idea emerges that certain experiences are to be inscribed on the blank page of Ellen Roxburgh's being; the notion of inscription given particular force by the person articulating this idea having the name "Scrimshaw."

Within the carriage scene there is a model of observed experience which is repeated throughout the novel. Here the emancipist Delaney tells the occupants of the carriage about two shepherds killed and partly eaten by natives. "Mrs Merivale might have been impaled; Miss Scrimshaw on the other hand, continued distantly watching a scene, each detail of which filled her with a fascinated horror" (20). We see the experiencing of a represented other through observation as if in a theatrical space. This points forward to an episode later in the novel when Ellen Roxburgh is being told by the convict Jack Chance of his lover Mab:

Had it not been for his detachment, she might have re-lived against her will the last moments of what represented her real life. As it was, she only re-enacted them, brightly lit as for a troupe of actors on a stage seen from the depths of a darkened theatre, a woman stepping forward to drag a spear from out of the throat of a man lying wounded upon the sand (262).

As he recounts his tale "she was committed to following him through whatever darkness he led" (293). "He could not guess the extent to

⁹ Carolyn Bliss, *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 155.

which she was taking part" and "her vision would not be shaken off" (294). The first chapter also connects with the incident when Austin is told of the suffering of convicts by the second mate Pilcher. This becomes for Austin "something he might have experienced himself" (137). The respective characters are confronted in these incidents with a series of reality effects. Theirs is a theatre of experience entered into in order "to bridge the gulf separating life from their own lives" (137). It is this theatre of experience that is introduced in the first chapter. It thus operates to introduce a specifically theatrical way of seeing and also to reveal, through the repetition of this mode, the a priori aspect of the theatrical; repeatability.

What is revealed in this chapter is an enclosed action within a capsule. This action is a becoming. In Miss Scrimshaw's case it is a becoming in which suffering of a kind that represents an extreme of human experience is seen-as that which it is. It is observed as if in a theatre, and assumes the character of a spectacle while at the same time offering an experience which is lived. It is thus a contained or bounded becoming in which no in-itself is reached, but rather a state of being is expressed. Becoming is thus given the character of being in its unfolding within the static frame of the enclosed space of the carriage: just as Ellen sees her own becoming (immediately after viewing herself dragging the spear out of her husband's neck the narrator asks "was she *becoming* callous"—italics mine) as a detached spectacle as in a "darkened theatre." The theatre can be seen as representing being, which is thus not an absolute: it is "theatrical." It is the enclosed space which allows things, not to be seen-as-such, but to be seen-as. This model of becoming within an apparent being is seen throughout the novel.

The forms that White employs throughout *A Fringe of Leaves* in which to enclose the action have a clearly theatrical quality. Zulfikar Ghose spots this quality but is content to see it merely as a weakness, as a failure to create new forms in order to facilitate the perception of "truth in one comprehensive vision."¹⁰ He finds White's forms "hackneyed," "old-fashioned," and at times descending to the level of "cheap melodrama." I would suggest that White deliberately employs

¹⁰ 'The One Comprehensive Vision,' 261-265.

these artificial forms as part of a movement away from the modernist project in his fiction and towards a multiplicity of "vision" appropriate to one who might be responding to those philosophical ideas which I allude to and whose fiction is taking on more and more the characteristics of the post-modern. White purposefully places his characters in scenes. The absolute or essential does not enfold them, they are actors amid the painted flats and backdrops of the theatre.

Just as the novel's forms can be seen as theatrical, the central character, Ellen Roxburgh, embodies a structure which is analogous to the theatrical. In some ways she appears to be puzzling; not just because of what she is, and isn't, but because of the ways in which she is presented. The reader may feel uncomfortable about her and may even reject her as a convincing human being. As I have already suggested, she is an odd mixture of the strong and the passive, of the passionately engaged and the detached. She may stand as an example of David Sampson's contention that for White: "The real is more important than the realistic; consistent and coherent characterization is less significant than the inconsistent and the incoherent."¹¹ She appears as one who is prepared to suffer in order to realise some ultimate in experience, as one of her acquaintances, the sibylline Miss Scrimshaw says of her in the opening chapter (17). Yet in the end she is content with the performance of her socially prescribed duty, as "she accepted once more the fate or chains that human beings were imposing on her" (346), and with the affirmation of the idea that a woman is "like moss or lichen that takes to some tree or rock as she takes to her husband" (363). The novel ends with her apparently about to enter a life of quiet domesticity with the respectable merchant Mr. Jevons. At one point in a dream, as she is lashed by her knotted hair, she cries: "I will, I *must* endure it because this is my only purpose" (140). This dream captures the extremes of passion and passivity and their site within Ellen which shows her as both a real character and something which evades the normal literary critical categories.

Ellen appears to be unusually passive, while at the same time being unusually participative in the more extreme reaches of human

¹¹ David Sampson, 'Black and White: *A Fringe of Leaves*,' *Meridian*, 2, 2 (October 1983), 111.

experience. Carolyn Bliss finds this "disconcerting,"¹² yet this can be seen as a typical feature of White's characters, in that: "The human self is comprised of layers in White's fiction, even as phenomena appear to be layered."¹³ Yet here this layering is contradictory in an especially suggestive way. For example, we are told, in an episode from the Hobart Town sojourn, that:

Swept onward by the wind, her skirt blown in a tumult before her, she tried to persuade herself that her husband, like the tree which had offered sanctuary, supported a belief in her own free will. Yet she had been blown as passively against the one as against the other. The tree happened to be standing in her path, just as a crude, bewildered girl, alone and bereaved on a moor, could hardly have rejected Mr Roxburgh's offer.

So that she was dragged back into the forest clearing . . . to the only instance when her will had asserted itself, and then with bared, ugly teeth (119).

This passivity is emphasised again and again in the novel, yet she also appears to be driven by deep-seated, if vaguely felt, needs and longings. She is the compliant captive of an aboriginal tribe, as she was of her husband Austin: she is their "work of art" (225), just as she is Austin's "work of art" (54). Yet she indulges in adultery and then cannibalism; picking up a discarded human bone and "tearing at it with her teeth" (244). She later reflects on

how tasting flesh from the human thigh-bone in the stillness of a forest morning had nourished not only her animal body but some darker need of the hungry spirit (245).

The two episodes alluded to here are connected through the common image of bared teeth, together with the stillness of a forest setting. In both we see a passive surface covering underlying depths of insistent desire. Both passivity and desire are pushed to such extremes that they threaten to tear apart the fabric of a convincingly represented human being.

We may wonder whether White is in control and whether Ellen Roxburgh is reduced to a puppet at the service of ideas not connected to recognisably human situations. I want to argue that the question as to what Ellen Roxburgh is, is central to an understanding of the novel, and I will focus most of my discussion on her. Ellen is peculiar, in my

¹² Patrick White's *Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*, 154.

¹³ William J. Scheick, 137.

view, because, while she is in many respects a convincing human being, she is as at the same time something that is representative of an a priori state which is analogous to Heidegger's Dasein. This is a condition that goes further than that suggested by Manfred Mackenzie when he writes that Ellen is the culmination of "White's latest myth of nakedness."¹⁴ The strange contrasts in her character exist not as a result of a split between passion and passivity as characteristics of a human subject, but due to an ur-desire and an ur-passivity which are in fact pointers to something that is analogous to the general Heideggerean existential Being-in-the-world that precedes the particular human subjectivity that is Ellen Roxburgh. Passivity and passion are not here entirely indications of, nor the contents of a description of, a human subject. They are here *expressions* of a mode of Being which point back to that which lies ungrounded prior to the arrival of a "character" which is amenable to description. It is because they are both connected and unconnected to psychological categories that they have an "unrealistic" quality. Michael Gelven in his commentary on *Being and Time* writes that:

What Heidegger means by Being-in in the ontological sense is the *a priori* "ability" to have things that we relate to, care about, and concern ourselves with. A somewhat free phenomenological etymology of the English term "human being" may be helpful. "Human" comes from the Latin word *humus*, "earth." A human being, then, is one who exists in such a way as to belong to this earth—i.e., a *human* being is an earth being in the sense of having a home here. It *belongs*. This does mean to suggest that one cannot have feelings of alienation or feel as if one were a stranger in the world. For to be a stranger in one place means that there is another place where one is at home, even if one can't find it or doesn't know where it is. Heidegger speaks of "dwelling." We do not say that water "resides" or "dwells" in a glass; only Dasein can dwell. The real meaning behind this existential is that my *surroundings* . . . are not simply *there*, but they affect me and I them. I cannot think of myself as existing simply as a space-time locus. Hence the categories that account for such location do not exhaust the explanation of my Being-in-a-world. I need, in addition, an *a priori* explanation of how I *can* feel at home or alienated (54).

Ellen Roxburgh exhibits characteristics analogous to Dasein because she dwells in the way that is explained above. I want to suggest that her condition is analogous to what I have referred to as the "theatrical." This is because she is herself the space of the unconcealment of her own becoming. Here that "openness to experience"¹⁵ that Mark Williams sees as characteristic of Ellen is

¹⁴ 'Tradition and Patrick White's Individual Talent,' 162.

¹⁵ *Patrick White*, 133.

radicalised. The theatrical in this sense subsumes within its structure both the a priori and the a posteriori. This is because it has existential attributes in that it offers a seeing-as structure allowing that which appears within the theatrical space to appear *as* that which it is. In other words, lying behind the sensuous appearing of action and character, is a perduring form which enables this appearing to occur.

Both Heidegger and Derrida can be seen as contesting the concept of the "as-such" and "in-itself." Heidegger through his notion that these categories are derivative of Being, and Derrida through his idea that "*the thing itself is a sign*."¹⁶ By this Derrida means that our experience of things is akin to our experience of signs. In his analysis of the sign he sees three factors at work which deny the realisation or availability to consciousness of a fully present meaning. These deny the groundedness of the sign on anything that might be called "essence."¹⁷ These three are: repeatability, which splits the identity of the sign a priori, signification as the trace of a difference, and articulatory spacing.¹⁸ In regard to the first of these Derrida writes in *Speech and Phenomena* that

the ideality of the form (*Form*) of presence itself implies that it be infinitely re-peatable, that its re-turn, as a return of the same, is necessary *ad infinitum* and is inscribed in presence itself (67).

And further:

In all these directions, the presence of the present is thought of as arising from the bending-back of a return, from the movement of a repetition, and not the reverse. Does not the fact that this bending-back is irreducible in presence or in self-presence, that this trace or difference is always older than presence and procures for it its openness, prevent us from speaking about a simple self-identity . . . ? Does this not compromise the usage Husserl wants to make of the concept of "solitary mental life," and consequently of the rigorous separation of indication from expression? (68)

The "now" depends on the "not-now" of the past. The sense of continuity upon which identity is based depends on a retention of past

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 49.

¹⁷ Wittgenstein's project in the *Philosophical Investigations* was directed at the same targets as Derrida's.

¹⁸ See Staten, 60.

nows. Derrida argues that this means that any now can never be a full presence since it is infected by the trace of the not now.

Repetition is not, according to Derrida's analysis, determined by identity, rather identity is determined by repetition. In the theatrical, identity, or *role*, is determined by repetition since repeatability is the essence of the theatrical part or role. The theatrical action shows up *as* theatrical action because it is not "real" action, thus it is a differentiated action. Finally, it is articulated, as is the sign, by spacing between scenes and acts. The presence of the theatrical mode, even in adumbrated form, hints at the non-presence at the heart of presence, which in turn denies the realisation of identity as unity. Thus the theatrical is analogous to Derrida's conception of writing, which is based on a further analogy between actual writing and the *a priori* features mentioned above which perdure and are like an inscribed sign system always already operating as the necessary precondition of any actual sign system whether merely verbal or written. The operation of theatrical elements in the text has the effect of rendering unclear, as in Derrida's critique of Husserlian phenomenology, the distinction between "indication" and "expression." Thus the characters in White's text can be seen as involved in the expression of states of Being, rather than in the indication of transcendent spheres of meaning, when they "see" the "ultimate." This qualifies the idea expressed by Caroline Bliss that Ellen "must come to know" an "ultimate self."¹⁹

Unlike Nabokov, whose fictions were, *inter alia*, designed to be such around which "Freudians flutter . . . avidly, approach with itching oviducts, stop, sniff, and recoil,"²⁰ White's novels cause the latter, as well as Jungians, to frolic gleefully through the pages of text like spring lambs in a field of lucerne. The split within characters, such as that alluded to in regard to Ellen Roxburgh, helps explain how White's fiction has this accommodating aspect for psychoanalytic critics. I am more interested in seeing what lies behind this split; in what makes such a split show up in the first place. We can see this idea of a passive surface which conceals hidden depths in the image which Miss Scrimshaw uses in the novel's first chapter to describe

¹⁹ Patrick White's *Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*, 156.

²⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Eye* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 9.

Scrimshaw, a woman of prophetic insight, has said that Ellen is a mystery. Mrs Merivale asks her to explain and the sybilline spinster replies that Ellen Roxburgh reminded her "of a clean sheet of paper which might disclose an invisible writing – if breathed upon" (17).

Attention should be directed here, not to what this image reveals about an entity—a human subject—but to what it reveals about a *process*. The clean sheet of paper is not only an image of the surface, it is an image of a space of revealing, of what Heidegger called unconcealment. The first is a characteristic of an entity, the second of a process. In addition, there is another part to the image; someone or something that by its activity, its breathing, causes the surface to change, and to reveal its secret writing. What is alluded to here is an existential pre-condition: in other words, the image points to what must precede a human subject, not merely to what a human subject is like. It delineates a capacity and a relationship. The clean sheet of paper will always be blank unless another breathes upon it. The paper thus has the capacity to be a site of unconcealment. Heidegger characterises the truth as unconcealment, this in turn takes place in a space, or a clearing. This clearing is the necessary precondition for the unconcealment of Being. The clean sheet of paper can thus be seen as an image of this clearing, which in turn is one of the characteristics of Dasein.

Another characteristic of Dasein is that which involves a being together with others. Heidegger calls this *Mit-sein*, or Being-with. Ellen needs others to reveal her Being. We see here support for the idea that in White's earlier fiction "his protagonists and the values which justified them were more or less homeless, did not belong in the world of commonsense, here they are very much its inhabitants."²¹ This need does not reflect a psychological category pertaining to a subject, but is an existential passivity which predetermines our human capacity to be turned towards others, and for others to be turned towards us. Something in the very impersonality of the image assists this interpretation. The capacity which it reveals is the always already unconcealment of the truth of Being in the space of Dasein by another. This existential capacity is suggested by Sidney Nolan's painting used

²¹ 'A *Fringe of Leaves: Civilization by the Skin of Our Own Teeth*,' 137.

on the cover of the novel. It depicts two naked figures who appear fused together suggesting a kind of mutually dependent existence. The primitive, sparse qualities of the painting with its background of a void-like sky and bare earth suggest a kind of a priori condition.

This kind of interpretation can be carried through the text as other images reinforce this idea of Ellen somehow embodying the a priori. In the next chapter, as Ellen recalls meeting Miss Scrimshaw and Mrs Merivale, the unusual shawl that she wears is described.

Mrs Roxburgh stood arrested, and fell into one of those silences, the gravity or 'mystery' of which, the two ladies afterwards discussed. All the while the tones in the shawl had continued fluctuating, from sombre ash, through the living green which leaves flaunt in the wind, the whole slashed with black as far as the heavy woollen fringe. This too, was black, relieved by recurrent threads of green (25).

Her silence and gravity suggest the same passive qualities as does the image of the blank sheet of paper. Here the shawl seems to fill the gap left by her withdrawal into silence. In a sense it replaces her. What I want to suggest here is that the shawl can be seen as a kind of existential metonym, being contiguous, in a sense, with a condition analogous to Dasein as the space of unconcealment. The shawl fluctuates from "sombre ash" to "living green." It thus plays out the movement of existence. It fills Ellen's "regrettable silence" with an oscillation from death, or non-being (ash), to life, or Being (living green). In a sense it is existence. We see this later in the novel when the shawl again appears. In this instance Ellen is talking to the cabin-boy Oswald Dignam as their ship sails up the coast. They have encountered a patch of thick fog, and as Ellen departs to her cabin

the boy's face was first blurred, then obliterated by the unconscionable fog. Sometimes toiling uphill, sometimes teetering sideways with little, drunken steps, she held tightly to the points of her elbows inside the pretty, fringed shawl. In this manner she preserved something of her physical self from the general amorphousness in which Oswald Dignam was lost and her own thoughts and hair floated as undirected as seaweeds (148).

The shawl preserves Ellen from amorphousness while shortly after this episode Oswald drowns. The shawl contains and preserves Ellen, and Oswald is obliterated by non-existence.

Ellen's life is likened to a maze, a labyrinth through which she must find a way. Lying on her bunk aboard ship she is "encouraged to re-enter her maze (62), and her life is characterised as a "presence in a clueless maze" (226). It is significant that her shawl is, at one point, described as "mazy" (26). We see here a further connection between this garment and its wearer's existence. The shawl is a link to an *a priori* sphere which may be likened to Heidegger's *Dasein*; to that which is aware of its own being or existence. It extends beyond the particular individual, Ellen Roxburgh, to suggest a universal existential significance. The image of the maze combines both the determinate, in the idea of an enclosed space, and the indeterminate, in the idea of directionlessness. It can thus be seen as operating as a metaphor of the relationship between being and becoming, and of exhibiting a theatrical structure. In what is possibly Ellen's most intensely felt experience, the death of her husband, she cries out in anguish: "Oh, no, Lord! Why are we born, then?" (215). This is a central question in the novel and reveals its primary focus on the meaning of existence. Like Elizabeth Hunter Ellen faces this question more completely and intensely than any other character. In being enclosed in this shawl of existence she is the space within existence which is open to the question of Being, which we hear in her anguished cry. It is this openness which issues into the psychological sphere as passivity and detachment. It appears strange by the standards of verisimilitude because it is thrown up by an existential condition which precedes any such category as cause and effect.

Ellen, inasmuch as she contains within her such a *a priori* elements, takes on characteristics which are analogous to those Heideggerean existentials which make her a clearing, or a space of unconcealment. It is important to realise that seen in this way she is not a particular human subject; the *a priori* comes before specific subjectivities, and thus my line here does not involve any psychological approach. It is interesting to note in connection with this idea that the German word which Heidegger uses and which is translated into English as "clearing" refers specifically to a forest clearing. One of the first experiences Ellen has which may be taken to indicate an insight into the phenomenon of the self takes place in a forest clearing in Van Diemen's Land. Staying at the farm of her brother-in-law Garnet Roxburgh, she decides to explore the nearby

forest, and "at one point a path, or more precisely, a tunnel, invited her to enter". Caressed by giant ferns:

She was so entranced she sat down in a small clearing . . . Removing the superfluous bonnet and loosening her matted hair, she felt only remotely related to Ellen Roxburgh, or even Ellen Gluyas; she was probably closer to the being her glass could not reveal, nor her powers of perception grasp, but whom she suspected must exist none the less.

She dreams of a sensuous encounter with her brother-in-law. Then she wakes to see that:

The spangled net of sunlight had been raised from the clearing in which she lay, leaving her surrounded by a black and hostile undergrowth. Seizing her bonnet by the strings . . . she hurried down the tunnel to regain the road (82-83).

We see that while in this clearing she experiences some kind of awareness of a hidden aspect of her being; one that she cannot grasp. Being led by "a deeper prepossession of her own" to dream of Garnet reveals a primal layer of sensuality within her. It is clear throughout the novel that basic sensual urges characterise her existence. Ellen can be seen here as both a particular human being, and as suggesting something like Heidegger's Dasein; the open space where the truth of Being is unconcealed. The need to use another as an instrument of this self exploration, here Garnet, is indicative of something like Mit-sein, as well as the specific desires of a specific person.

To return to the shawl, we are told that it has woven into it a leaf pattern (111). In the light of the forest clearing episode it can be seen that the shawl is, in a sense, the forest which surrounds the clearing, or Ellen in her aspect as the existential clearing. Just as the forest defines the clearing so, in a sense, the shawl defines Ellen. Further; just as the forest in defining the clearing, is contiguous with it, so too the shawl is contiguous with Ellen. If we see Ellen as the clearing, the shawl as the forest, then the shawl can be seen as an existential metonym. Ellen, seen under this aspect is a space of unconcealment, while the shawl is a space of concealment. Later the shawl is replaced by a fringe of real leaves. The same meaning that attaches to the shawl can be seen here as well. Ellen conceals her wedding ring in her leafy fringe and what is unconcealed in the space of her naked person are those primal urges which stand in contrast to the civilized values represented by the ring.

These are primal characteristics of Dasein, the space where the truth of Being is both unconcealed and concealed. Just as the forest defines the clearing, the clearing carries the trace of the forest within it. Ellen's powers of perception cannot grasp what is uncovered, since the clearing conceals at the same time as it unconceals. A vision of the truth of Being is never complete or clear, thus she cannot perceive "the being her glass could not reveal." There are other passages in the novel which suggest this. One example comes from the final section at the Moreton Bay settlement. Ellen, dressed in black and sitting in the shade of a tree, meets the settlement's doctor. There:

The tree of shiny, dark, all but black foliage and spreading habit, was native by appearance, hence belonging to the catalogue of items the surgeon felt bound to dismiss out of loyalty to his origins, yet the rudiments of aesthetic instinct made him pause, if not to enjoy, to wonder at this picture of black competing with black. What made it oddly satisfying was perhaps the air of tranquillity emanating from tree and woman and the light which spangled both (315).

The dark green and black are reminiscent of the shawl. Ellen conflates with her surroundings in a way that echoes the earlier conflation in the forest clearing, and also reminds us of the relationship between shawl and wearer. There is a suggestion of something being revealed, while at the same time, concealed. The structure of existence itself is suggested here, rather than any essential or underlying aspects of human personality.

With these ideas in mind, we can see later incidents in the novel under a similar aspect. For example, when together with the escaped convict Jack Chance, Ellen experiences a number of ostensible epiphanies. One such experience occurs after she and Chance have had sex. Before they do, the convict, in order to persuade her "breathed in her ear, 'If I am to trust you, Ellen, you should trust me. Two bodies that trust can't do hurt to each other'" (268). Here Chance is literally a breather who acts on the passive Ellen, causing her to reveal, or unconceal, an aspect of her Being—her sensuality. "She allowed him to free her of the girdle of vines, her fringe of shed or withered leaves, which had been until now the only disguise for her nakedness." The following morning as the sun shines into their makeshift shelter Ellen experiences a perception of a self which

belongs to "an age of gold," that primal age described by Ovid, which is the pagan counterpart of the Christian Eden. This age of gold was a time characterised by peace, harmony, love and trust. After she wakes:

In the mood in which she found herself she would have liked to drowse. The alchemy of morning was changing steel into gold. It slid along her skin bringing the flesh back to life. She glanced sleepily along *her* [italics mine] as far as the armpit. All that she saw belonged to an age of gold in no way connected with a body scarred, withered, and blackened by privation; nor yet the form which luxury had polished and adorned; not even her clumsy, protuberant girlhood. She lay stropping a cheek against an arm, hoping to arrive at layers of experience deeper still, which he alone knew how to induce (270).

Following this vision she reflects on the question as to whether she could love Chance, and decides that she could.

What is seen in this incident is not a worldless, or essential self. Rather, what we see as belonging to the age of gold is a self always already in a world. This is suggested by the use of the non-reflexive pronoun, "her." Ellen sees an object in the world which does not have the proximity or the sense of subjectivity suggested by the word "herself." The meaning points back to a site of significance that lies prior to space and time, and to the subject/object dichotomy. We are directed, not to an entity, but to a capacity to love and trust another. We see something analogous to Heidegger's existential "care." Michael Gelven writes that:

On a purely intuitional level the claim that care is the Being of Dasein seems an unobjectionable claim that is easy to grasp. What it means for one to be is to care. This seems supported by the realisation that everything one does can be interpreted as manifesting a kind of caring. When I reflect upon myself, I center upon my interests, my concerns, my excitements, my disappointments, etc., and all of these things can be seen as a kind of caring. Furthermore, the claim seems even more supported by the fact that my own existence reveals itself more clearly in moments of increased caring. When I care very deeply, as in love or terror, guilt or courage, my own unique and individual existence seems amplified (119-120).

It is this sense of amplified Being that is conveyed in episodes such as that just referred to.

Chance breathes words relating to the need for trust into Ellen's ear. This breathing onto the blank sheet of her self-as-existential-precondition reveals the secret writing of her capacity to love. The

existential precondition, "care," shows forth the "writing" of her love for Chance; a love which is the fullest expression of her Being. Ellen's sense of Being is thus amplified in care. What we see is a coming-into-Being which is a representation of existence, rather than a representation of an entity, or a pure being. The sensual elements contained in this episode may be seen as reinforcing the sense of heightened Being. This is conveyed particularly in the cat-like gesture of her "stopping a cheek against an arm." Just as she relied on another—Garnet—for self-revelation in the Van Diemen's Land episode, so here she relies on another—Chance—as he alone knows how to induce this awareness of a fulness of existence.

What this incident represents is an intensification of the process of existence. This is not, however, a process based on cause and effect. It is obvious, though, that there is a causal link between Chance and Ellen's experience. What is interesting to note is that there seems to be an *excess* of effect evident, an excess that the category of cause and effect does not exhaust. It is this excess that points to the presence of the *a priori*. It could of course be argued that this excess points to a metaphysical transcendent essence. However, against this view can be set the sensual aspects of the scene. These shift the scene's centre of gravity into existence, and away from the transcendent. The excess apparent is not ethereal or other-worldly, it is very much this-worldly. The age of gold becomes a mode of existence, not transcendence. This is the same as Ellen's experience, discussed in the Introduction, when she sees the Oakes's farm from the top of a tree: the ostensibly transcendent moment flowing into the scenes of everyday life. In another sense too the age of gold operates as a form. It encompasses a becoming within being. The age of gold becomes an Age of Gold, but not a set form as in a myth, rather, the form of a set, as in the theatre. It is not a transcendent entity or idea, it is a backdrop against which an action is seen-as a coming-into-beatitude. Being and becoming are subsumed within the one ungrounded structure.

A passage towards the end of the novel is especially revealing of this aspect of Ellen Roxburgh as a space of unconcealment. This is the episode where she speaks to the Commandant as she is preparing to leave Moreton Bay. Ellen is wearing a widow's veil which she raises to admire the view. She addresses Captain Lovell concerning her desire

for the escaped convict Jack Chance to be pardoned. He taps her on the arm with the sealed despatch containing a plea to the Governor on behalf of the convict. As he does so:

The light glancing off the river struck at the scarlet seal, which glittered like blood only recently clotted.

The Commandant could not help but notice the pulse beating in the throat of this woman who moved and disturbed him more perhaps than domesticity and official position warranted.

Soon after, the company was summoned to what Miss Scrimshaw described as a *déjeuner à la fourchette*, which they gladly demolished, and Captain Lovell took leave of his tearful wife and excited children.

But as he stood in the moored skiff his attention may have been concentrated rather, on the woman in black.

Mrs Roxburgh was standing alone at the bulwark, staring it seemed, at the foreshore of grey mangroves, at their oily reflections in muddy water, for the sun had gone in and the sky removed the last of its blue twitching streamers from the brown surface of the river. So the Commandant observed, so too, Mr Jevons, so Miss Scrimshaw, more closely than any. She would always remember what sounded like a sudden cry of pain, as quickly suppressed as it was briefly uttered.

She went forward to offer sympathy and support, but Mrs Roxburgh had veiled herself; her step was firm, her voice dry and steady. 'Let us go below,' she decided. 'We have said good-bye. I have done my duty, I hope, by everybody' (360-361).

Ellen unveils herself and the light strikes at the scarlet seal of the despatch. This sets in train an articulating movement from seal to clotted blood (connected both with Austin's death and the "patternless welter of healed wounds" (250) on Chance's back), to the pulse in Ellen's throat which "moved and disturbed" Captain Lovell. Following this the light is withdrawn and Ellen replaces her veil, thus concealing what had been unconcealed. The "truth" of Ellen, her passionate sensuality, is replaced by the dry affirmation of conventional duty, which is a concomitant of the widow's veil. This "truth" is not an absolute but is a characteristic, or expression of Ellen's Being-in-the-world, which includes both the passionate and the morally upright. This is reaffirmed in the final image offered in the novel of Ellen sensuously clad in garnet coloured silk together with the commandant's wife and children: both "contained within the same ellipse of light" (366). She is herself a space of unconcealment in which her becoming is seen *as* absolute being.

That the moment of insight is part of the broader scenes of existence can be seen in the way that this moment connects to a surrounding continuum. We can see here a movement—from the seal, to blood, to pulse, to duty—in which the unveiled moment is

attached to a surrounding continuum. Her husband's death, the sufferings of her lover Chance, her own passionate nature and the public forms of obligation and responsibility are thus drawn into this moment of being. The moment of being cannot therefore be separated from the flux of life in which it occurs. This movement suggests the flow of becoming; a flow which enters the circle of being. This is so because Ellen's being is the precondition for the uncovering that occurs, and this being is a becoming which extends beyond the moment of unconcealment into the scenes of life around it. Thus we see a structure which is prior to any subject-object split and which can be characterised as a structure of uncovering, and of expression, rather than correspondence. There is no essential difference between these two; there is rather what might be called a rhetorical difference. In other words, the juxtapositions are syntactical rather than metaphysical. This is a difference which distinguishes the veiled from the unveiled. What we see here is a denial of presence wherein reality is not able to settle into any fully comprehensible vision of being. The flow of becoming invades the moment of being and blurs the purity of vision, as is suggested as this scene just discussed is described as "a canvas painted in turgid oils" (360). This blurring conflates any dualities or dichotomies which may otherwise appear and also disintegrates any metaphysical unity. Thus, what can be seen is a continuum which suggests neither duality nor unity. It is a continuum expressed in relationship.

Relationships are represented spatially in the text in such a way as to cut across the limits of space and time. This spatial articulation reveals the a priori existential of *Mit-sein*. The always already nature of Being-with-another is suggested by these structures which deny cause and effect and reveal an a-temporal and a-spatial capacity. Thus the journey through the bush is timeless: "Whether today's or tomorrow's or yesterday's it was all one by now, a continuous seamless tapestry, its details recurrent and interchangeable" (281). It is a "timeless frieze, of burning earth, and ghosts, and ghostlier living figures." The principal relationship of the novel up until Austin Roxburgh's death is that between him and his wife Ellen. It is a relationship characterised by his dependence on his wife. This relationship becomes replaced by that between Ellen and Jack Chance, who we are told depends on Ellen, despite being her rescuer. The link

between the two is suggested in an episode just before Ellen reaches Moreton Bay. After having swum in a lake the two lie together. Ellen sees a tree she wants to climb but:

Jack the convict, her saviour-lover, must have been dozing. His hand gave like a weakened lock to allow her her freedom. She moved carefully, remembering, when she did not care to remember, that other hand on which she had trodden unintentionally. She did not wish to hurt this sleeping man who depended on her, and whom she truthfully loved (285).

Both men, Austin and Jack have rescued Ellen, the former from poverty, and the latter, from enslavement. "That other hand" she thinks of is the hand of her dead husband as he lay on the beach after his murder (218).

Ellen begins to climb the tree, "and as she rose the sun struck at her through the foliage furbishing her with the same gold" (286). Jack climbs up after her and:

At one point she dared glance down, and there was the ring jiggling on its cord, and not so far below her the crown of the convict's head, darkened by water except where a whorl at the centre exposed the tanned scalp beneath.

Her line of vision extends past her wedding ring, tied to the fringe of leaves, to Chance the convict, her new "husband." The whorl in his hair, seen from above, links back to the scene on board ship when Ellen, lying in the upper bunk in their cabin, dreams of her husband's death. She

awoke and looked down at the lower berth. Her husband was seated on the edge, head bowed, legs dangling. She recognised the whorl in the crown of dark hair which would serve as an identification mark in the most horrible circumstances (140).

There is a clear structure of perception here which cuts across space and time and which points to the a priori rather than to the transcendent. These structures point to the always already condition of Being-in-the-world. Barthe's idea that the theatrical is "the practise which calculates the place of things, as they are observed" quoted in the Introduction, is apposite here. It is worthwhile to continue the quote. He writes:

If I set the spectacle here, the spectator will see this; if I put it elsewhere, he will not, and I can avail myself of this masking effect and play on the illusions it provides. The stage is the line which stands across the path of the optical pencil, tracing at once the point at which it is brought to a stop and, as it were, the threshold of its ramifications. Thus is found, against music (against text)—representation. Representation is not defined directly by imitation: even if one gets rid of the "real," of the "vraisemblable," of the "copy," there will be representation for so long as the subject (author, reader, spectator, or voyeur) casts his gaze toward a horizon on which he cuts out the base of a triangle, his eye (or his mind) forming the apex.

We see this theatrical in the positioning in White's text. So that relationships and connections can be observed—seen-as that which they are—space/time, "the base of a triangle," is cut out.

Immediately after Ellen views the circular pattern in her husband's hair, Austin complains of experiencing acute pain. His wife climbs down and begins to comfort him by rubbing his knees with tincture of digitalis:

Now the world had shrunk to its core, or to the small circle of light in the middle of the ocean, in which two human souls were momentarily united, their joint fears fusing them into a force against evil (141).

Earlier, at the start of their homeward journey from Sydney, Ellen expresses fears and Austin comforts her by stroking her head. Here:

Although their ship remained stationary, the cosmos revolved about them as he caressed her head with the short circular motions he had cultivated as a sickly boy, when a cat he owned would spring and curl up on his lap. It sometimes occurred to him on remembering Tabby that he had not been on better terms with any living being (37).

These circular motions administered to the head echo the whorls seen on the heads of the two men later in the novel. They form a pattern with the circular images that run through the passages just quoted; the "circle of light" and the revolving cosmos. They can be seen as pointing to a core of reality, their mandalic aspect suggesting some urge towards unity and completeness. In other words they may be suggestive of an aspect of being as an ontic phenomenon. Yet the circular motif also suggests a clearing, and as such points to a significance in line with Heidegger's existential analysis, which is concerned with Being, or with what it means to be. The particular significance suggested here is that feature of Dasein called Being-in-the-world. The circle, and the vortical images, suggest an embedding

of the self in existence as an always already a priori condition. That Ellen and Austin are fused together suggests a structure of perception created by this existential condition whereby the self is not only always already in a world, but also always already with others. Ellen thus cannot conceive of herself, and does not exist, except in relationship with others. White, like Heidegger, examines the question of what it means to be in a world. Here is, again, a becoming held within a circle of being. It is, however, a circle that is theatrical and thus not absolute or ultimate.

Another example consists of the entire Van Diemen's Land section of the novel. This arises as a recollection of Ellen's while she lies on a bed aboard ship. She "lay, not uncomfortably, except for a slight nausea, in the hollow her husband's form had impressed on the palliasse, and was encouraged to re-enter her maze" (62). She thus recollects their stay in Van Diemen's Land while contained by her husband's form. Ellen is defined by her husband's absence, by his empty form impressed on the bed. It is the abstract, rather than the psychological, or sexual-political, significance that I wish to highlight here. This is a becoming within being and thus conforms to the abstract pattern set out in the opening chapter. This structure is repeated later in the novel immediately after the ship strikes the reef, and Austin goes in search of his Elzevir Virgil. In her husband's absence Ellen worries that he, or Pilcher, the hostile second mate, might find her journal and read there an account of her adulterous union with Garnet Roxburgh. She asks whether: "In the absence of her own regrettable journal, should she open his and pass the time reading from it?" (158) However, she wonders: "Would she find herself looking in a glass at a reflection which no amount of inherited cunning and cultivated self-deceit could help her dismiss?" These are structures of Being which articulate what it means to be. The recollection of Van Diemen's Land is thus grounded on a relationship. The structure of an autonomous self representing private mental images to itself is displaced by a structure of disclosure; the empty form in which Ellen lies represents this disclosing space. In a similar way Austin's journal, which has the same structural role as his empty form impressed on the bed, operates as a space of disclosure for Ellen.

This uncovering of Being is seen at the end of the novel as Mr Jevons regards Ellen seated next to Mrs Lovell and her children. The former

could not give over contemplating the smouldering figure in garnet silk beside the pregnant mother in her nest of roly-poly children, a breathing statuary contained within the same ellipse of light (365-366).

Uncovered here is a relationship in which sensuality, figured in the garnet silk dress which Ellen wears, and maternity are held together, while at the same time held apart. This is a showing forth of the "truth" of Ellen's Being. However, we do not see a unified entity which stands at the end of a process whereby "she descends into the depths of herself that she must reach and recognise before she can ascend into a personal wholeness."²²

An earlier incident on board *Bristol Maid* also shows this kind of perceptual structure. Austin Roxburgh has just been told by Pilcher about a sailor who died after falling from the rigging. Austin, in order to free himself of morbid thoughts, looks landward and asks the second mate if he had ever been into the interior.

'Nao!'

The mate was of another element. He continued staring at the water, his contemptuous expression dissolving in what entranced him.

'Not if I was paid,' Mr Pilcher said. 'Nothing there.'

On the other hand, he seemed to imply, the sea was peopled with his like.

'Only dirty blacks,' he added, 'and a few poor beggars in stripes who've bolted from one hell to another. The criminals they found out about! That's th'injustice of it. How many of us was never found out?'

Mr Pilcher spat into his element, but the wind carried the thread of spittle, stretching it into the shape of a transparent bow.

'That is certainly an argument,' Mr Roxburgh said.

'That is the truth!' the mate blurted passionately, and looked in the direction of the land. 'If I was sent out here in irons, for what I done—or what someone else had done, 'cause that can happen too, you know—I'd find a way to join the bolters. I'd learn the country by heart, like any of your books, Mr Roxburgh, and find more to it perhaps.'

The passenger was surprised that one whom he scarcely knew should be acquainted with his tastes.

'Experience, no doubt, leaves a deeper impression than words.'

'Specially when it's printed on yer back in blood.'

Mr Roxburgh winced, and sucked at his moustache.

'They wouldn't hold me, though,' Mr Pilcher continued. 'Not for long. No conger was ever slipp'rier,' he laughed, 'when his liberty was threatened . . .'

²² Manly Johson, 'Patrick White: *A Fringe of Leaves*,' *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*, 89.

Pilcher leaves, and Austin

was left with an impression of a vertical cut down either side of the man's mouth. Of course these were no more than lines with which the face had been weathered, but Austin Roxburgh could not avoid connecting them with their somewhat disturbing conversation. The conger was still twisting and glinting at a depth where he feared to follow, while in the element more natural to himself his hands had become unrecognisable as he tore a way through the blistering scrub, his nails as broken and packed with grime as the mate's own (134-135).

Later, in the cabin, Ellen asks her husband what he and Pilcher talked about. Austin is unwilling to respond:

In fact, the mate's allusions had disturbed him so deeply he would have preferred to dismiss them from his mind . . . 'It was about the country beyond,' he was forced to admit, 'beyond the known settlements. Prisoners,' he positively drove himself, 'will sometimes escape. And wander for years in the interior. Supporting themselves off the land. Suffering terrible hardships. But as a life it is more bearable than the one they bolted from.'

On passing a hand over his face he found he was perspiring for something he might have experienced himself. He realised, for that matter, he could have continued embroidering almost without end on the few words the mate had uttered (137).

There are a number of questions which arise from this passage. What is the nature of Austin's experience here? Why has he been so deeply disturbed by Pilcher's words? Why does he have to drive himself to tell his wife? Why does he feel that he might have experienced such an ordeal himself, and why does he feel that he could go on "embroidering almost without end on the mate's few words?"

We see here that excess of effect which escapes the category of causality. What he sees; the conger twisting and glinting at a depth, and his hands as he tears his way through the scrub; together with what he experiences; the hardships of an escaped convict, represent a kind of super-charged seeing and experiencing that is a bridging of "the gulf separating life from their own lives" (137). His experience unites him with Chance, the escapee. He enters Chance's "element", and it becomes "his." We have here a conflation of the two in line with the conflation discussed earlier, which is suggested in the linked images of the whorls of hair on their respective heads. The seeing that Austin is privy to may be triggered by the likeness that exists between Pilcher's face and certain elements of their conversation. The vertical cuts either side of Pilcher's mouth are connected to the gill slits of the

conger which Pilcher alludes to, and which Austin subsequently "sees." The cuts also connect with the lashes that convicts, especially those who bolt into the interior, receive.

Austin's experience cannot be explained in terms of the category of cause and effect. It is a particularly intense experience. He sees the conger "twisting and glinting at a depth," and he is displaced into the interior amongst "the blistering scrub" to perform the desperate acts of the escapee. These compelling effects have been triggered by the seeing of a likeness, and the question arises as to what this seeing of a likeness means, and to what does it point? This connects with the ideas of Wittgenstein relating to the two uses of the word "see" discussed in the Introduction. Ray Monk, in his biography of Wittgenstein, discusses this aspect of his thought, and explains how it is linked to Goethe's morphology of plants, which the latter developed in Italy and describes in his *Italian Journey*. Goethe's idea, Monk tells us,

was that plant-life could be studied systematically (but non-mechanically) if all plants could be seen under the aspect of a single *Gestalt*. For each type of natural phenomenon—for example, plants and animals—there was to be a single form, the *Urphänomen*, of which all instances of that type could be seen as metamorphoses (509-510).

Goethe writes that:

The Primal Plant is going to be the strangest creature in the world, which nature herself shall envy me. With this model and the key to it, it will be possible to go on for ever inventing plants and know that their existence is logical: that is to say, if they do not actually exist, they could, for they are not the shadowy phantoms of a vain imagination, but possess an inner necessity and truth.²³

The possession of "the Primal Plant" leads to the ability "to go on forever inventing plants" in the same way that Austin's possession of the Primal Experience of the glinting conger and the harsh interior enables him to continue "embroidering almost without end on the few words the mate had uttered". These Gestalten are partly a priori and partly a posteriori, and thus point to the existential preconditions of existence. Thus Austin is always already amid the blistering scrub of the interior in his revealing of the existential Mit-sein, or Being-with;

²³ J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey*, trans., W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 310-311.

while Pilcher is always already the conger—he dwells in his "element"—in his revealing of the existential Being-in-the-world.

The paradox here, which Wittgenstein was interested to consider, is that a gestalt is, at once, an idea and an object of sight. The significance of the seeing of a change of aspect is that that which lies outside, or around the experience, alters in some way. There is no inner realm which if affected, all lies open to view. It is the scenes of life that change: signification points outward, not inward. There occurs an expansion of Being, a broadening of outlook, seen in Austin *becoming* Chance. Meaning extends outward beyond any privileged sphere of private revelation. As Michael Gelven tells us: "Heidegger feels that in the case of one's ways of existing there is no difference between the fact and its meaning" (36). In other words meaning is co-extensive with the scenes in which existence is played out, and does not reside in any inner sphere. This scenic elaboration of meaning is theatrical in nature.

The question of primordially which is raised here requires further comment. Derrida, in *Speech and Phenomena*, was concerned to examine the question of the primordial and contends that: "Being-primordial must be thought on the basis of the trace, and not the reverse" (85). Austin's experience is "written" on the blank space of the interior at which he gazes in fascination from the ship. He bears the marks of the convict escapee struggling through the scrub, marks which are linked to the marks that he sees on the face of the second mate. These are traces in the Derridean sense in that they divide the self-presence of Austin and constitute him as a trace structure.²⁴ Derrida writes in *Speech and Phenomena* that

the self of the living present is primordially a trace . . . Sense . . . has always already issued forth from itself into the 'expressive stratum' of lived experience. Since the trace is the intimate relation of the living present with its outside, the openness upon exteriority in general, upon the sphere of what is not 'one's own,' etc., *the temporalization of sense is, from the outset, a 'spacing.'* As soon as we admit spacing both as 'interval' or difference and as openness upon the outside, there can no longer be any absolute inside, for the 'outside' has insinuated itself into the movement by which the inside of the nonspatial, which is called 'time,' appears, is constituted, is 'presented.' (85-86).

²⁴ See Jacques Derrida, 'Différance,' *Margins of Philosophy*, trans., Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 13.

Derrida, in his discussion of the primordial, is addressing the first use of the word "see" in Wittgenstein's analysis. This use of "see" has to do with the apprehension of entities, and is thus phenomenological, and epistemological. The second use of "see", as in the seeing of a likeness, is the temporalization of sense that Derrida alludes to. Goethe's primal plant is not primordial in the sense used in Derrida's discussion, it is rather the "object" in a seeing-as structure. It is a heuristic device designed to reveal an existential stratum. The question, "what changes?" is a phenomenological one, while the question as to what difference the seeing of a likeness or a change of aspect, directs attention to existence, rather than to entities.

"The 'understanding that consists in seeing connections', one might say, is the understanding that results from a change of aspect."²⁵ This understanding has to do with Ellen's perception, after Austin tells her about his conversation with Pilcher, that she "still had to bridge the gulf separating life from their own lives" (137). In other words, this experience of seeing something under a different aspect leads outward into the scenes of life. It has to do with existence and the process of living, not with the apprehension of truth. It is existential. Ellen's subsequent experiences are just such a bridging to a fulness of life. Austin as always already in the interior shows this always already issuing forth of sense into the scenes of life that both Derrida and Wittgenstein talk about. It enacts the "temporalisation of sense" that breaches the discrete spheres of sense and indication in the Husserlian model. What we see is not an insight into a transcendent realm of essential meaning, but a going forth of meaning away from this location into the world. White constructs a theatre of reality effects in which understanding is based on inter-scenic connections and not on the penetration to any essential realm of absolute truth. In this he is more easily accommodated, particularly with respect to the later novels, under the heading "post-modernist" rather than "modernist".

²⁵ Ray Monk, 508.

Chapter 4

The Geography of Flesh

According to Søren Kierkegaard:

It certainly does not help to make a fool of a person, to entice him with the subject-object when he himself is prevented from entering into the state in which he can relate himself to it, prevented because he himself, by virtue of existing, is in the process of becoming (C.U.P. 192).

Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair* delineates just such a process of becoming. The epigraph from David Malouf introduces this idea: "What else should our lives be but a series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become." Yet there is more in this novel than the simple flow of becoming. The novel's protagonist reflects at one point that "I would like to think myself morally justified in being true to what I am—if I knew what that is. I must discover" (63). Here we see adumbrated being—"being true to what I am"—and becoming—"I must discover." It is in this novel that the Nietzschean injunction to become what one is, is most clearly fore-grounded. The theatrical, in-as-much as it holds within its structure the tension between being and becoming, emerges, in this novel more clearly than in White's earlier fiction, as a trope of the ungrounded groundedness of existence.

S. A. Ramsey suggests that "Eddie contains within himself elements (fragments) of all the other selves he has encountered or succeeded. In this sense, therefore, his person can be seen both to possess, and to give new life to, a whole cast of other characters."¹ Noel Macainsh writes "that Eddie is never wholly *in* any of his situations; he is caught always in role-playing."² This view implies a distinction between identity and role, one

¹ S. A. Ramsey, "The Twyborn Affair": "the beginning in an end" or "the end of a beginning?" *Ariel*, 11, 4 (October, 1980), 91. In the quote from this article is suggested the Nietzschean idea that a thing is nothing more than the sum of its effects (W. P., sec. 551).

² Noel Macainsh, 'A Queer Unity—Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair*,' *Southerly*, 43, 1 (1983), 149.

which my interpretation contests. This novel is concerned, pre-eminently amongst White's novels, with the problem of identity. What is interesting here is that White brings about an inversion of the notion that identity is based on being. Here being is a function of identity, an identity which is thus not grounded. Since identity is not a function of being—is not grounded—it becomes a function of role which is not absolutely grounded and mimics being in having an iterative structure. It thus becomes theatrical since it becomes identity-as-role, and identity-as-role is dependent on the ungrounded structures which can be discerned in the theatrical, rather than on the grounded structure of some absolute being.

The novel concerns the attempt of a transvestite, Eddie Twyborn, to give shape to his life in "a world of fragmentation and despair" (420). Lying in his cabin aboard a ship en route to Australia he "wept inwardly, for the past as well as a formless future" (138). He becomes in succession a woman—the lover of a homosexual Greek, a man—a jackaroo, a woman again—the Madam of an exclusive London brothel immediately before the Second World War, and finally, just before his death, a man once again. He wears, in Kierkegaard's words, "the multitudinously compounded suit of finitude" (*C.U.P.* 410). He is "the eternal deserter in search of asylum" (143). In his guise as a jackaroo he reflects that "he would have every opportunity for impressing strangers with the self which, he felt sure, was in process of being born" (211). The protagonist sees himself, at the start of the second part, as a piece of jigsaw puzzle waiting to be fitted into the whole, thus achieving "a semblance of real life" (146). He thus seeks a form or role into which he can fit, and is therefore negatively defined by what lies around him; by a sequence of relationships. We see that the concept of role includes the notion of the part, or that which is defined by its relationship to other parts. Identity as role is identity as a relation.

The centrality of the concept of identity as a relation rather than a unity in this novel is suggested in a scene from Part Three where Eadith Trist is having lunch with her friend Gravenor.

She would have had to admit she had not existed in any of her several lives, unless in relationship with innocents, often only servants of ignoble masters, or for those who believed themselves her parents or lovers. She was accepted as real, or so it appeared, by the girls she farmed out for love, and who, if she were to be honest, amounted to fragments of a single image (336).

This is in line with the concept of identity outlined by Martin Heidegger in his *Identity and Difference*. Essential being thus becomes a characteristic of identity, denying being-as-ground. This is enhanced by the prevailing air of insubstantiality and uncertainty in this novel, and of a flowing towards something which never comes into clear focus. Eadith's identity is constituted by the role she adopts in this phase of her life—"She was accepted as real, or so it appeared." Her self-structure is thus not metaphysically grounded, but is based on her relationship with others. The structure of reality is the structure of fantasy—of the audience and the actor.

If identity, as traditionally conceived, is the unity of a thing with itself, then it would seem that an inherent disunity lies within existence as pertains to the relationship between consciousness, or thought, and being. As Kierkegaard suggests, existence keeps subject and object apart; there is thus an inevitable gap between the two. He writes that "existence has spaced and does space subject from object, thought from being" (*C.U.P.* 123). This prepares the way for Heidegger's later understanding of identity as a relation, rather than as a unity. The application of these ideas to *The Twyborn Affair* indicates that the novel's focus has shifted from the modernist concern with discovering "privileged modes of revelation that would offer access to an ontologically superior realm"³ to a grappling with the modes of existence; of Being, itself. Gnosis is replaced by praxis. Absolute being does not form a ground as it is replaced by identity—by identity-as-role. The theatrical mode enters here and becomes a metaphor of wholeness through erecting a containing form in which roles are played out. Thus its structure is rhetorical rather than essential. It constitutes a mode of quasi-presentation in which identity is closer to the Heideggerean concept of identity outlined in the Introduction. Thus identity is not connected to the apprehension of entities, but to an articulation of a relationship, which is in turn connected to the flow of a process—to existence. The theatrical space is a trope of containment in which the Heideggerean holding together, and at the same time apart, of thought and being is figured. As the novel focuses on existence-as-becoming, the question of identity becomes directed away from entities and towards this process.

³ Thiher, 37.

As I have argued, *The Twyborn Affair* is a novel fundamentally concerned with existence; with the process of becoming. A consequence of this is that identity is not a final goal, it is the basis of expression rather than indication. Kierkegaard writes:

Who is it who is supposed to have surmounted reflection? An existing person. But existence itself is the sphere of reflection, and an existing person is in existence and therefore in reflection—how, then, does he go about surmounting it? It is not difficult to perceive that in a certain sense the principle of identity is higher, is the basis of the principle of contradiction. But the principle of identity is only the boundary; it is like the blue mountains, like the line the artist calls the base line—the drawing is the main thing. Therefore, identity is a lower view than contradiction, which is more concrete. Identity is the *terminus a quo* [point from which] but not *ad quem* [to which] for existence (C.U.P. 421).

This is in line with the point made earlier with regard to Heidegger's understanding of identity. Identity replaces being-as-ground, but since identity is a relation—a process—it becomes a non-grounded ground. Wittgenstein writes, in regard to propositions, that: "One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it" (*P.I.* sec. 114). Propositions are here being viewed, not as forms encapsulating an essence, but as rhetorical devices which organise perception. Kierkegaard's conception of identity may be compared to this: that is, identity is an organising or rhetorical device, in the same way that the base line of a painting organises the composition of the whole. Identity is thus not an entity to be discovered beneath the multifarious planes of the self, but is the result of the apparent coherence of successive self-images. The base is not absolutely grounded, it is a rhetorical base akin to the set, or to a role, in a theatrical production. Identity has the character of a role and is thus tied to expression rather than indication.

We see this in the opening of *The Twyborn Affair* as Joanie Golson confronts an enigma that she has stumbled on by chance. She appears suspended between an ambiguous past and an equally uncertain future. She is afflicted, as an Australian, with a sense of inferiority in the company of her wealthy English friends: "she could feel a tic at work in her dimple like a canker in the rose" (13). In this state of uncertainty she clings to the forms of a particular mode of being, or role, supported by the accoutrements of material success, and the mannerisms befitting a person of her social class. She rides with her chauffeur: "Tilting her head, her

parasol, at the angle adopted by a lady enjoying foreign travel" (13). The appearance and mannerisms she adopts have a theatrical air. She also fulfills the role of an audience at a theatrical spectacle, in which she also participates. The scene she views at the villa is a painted scene with its background including "a view of the sea, its hyacinth deepening to purple at that hour of evening, islands of amethyst nestling in tender feathers of foam, clouds too detached in every sense to suggest anything physical, only a slash of brash sunset to warn of the menace invariably concealed in landscape and time" (17). She views the couple from a darkened space beyond the brightly lit "stage" of the villa and she tries to "identify herself more closely with every detail of the scene" (18).

In this state of insecurity and uncertainty her perceptions take on a similar quality. She represents Kierkegaard's existing individual, for whom: "The perpetual process of becoming is the uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain" (*C.U.P.* 86). As A. P. Riemer notes, "the opening section forges a world of strange ambivalences, of shifting perspectives and deceptive shadows, while highlighting the absurdity of humankind and its endeavours."⁴ Joanie recalls her experience of the previous day when she was driven past a villa and caught a glimpse of two intriguing people in the garden. The garden consists of, "probable almond trees, less equivocal olives, the clumps and spikes of lavender, and lesser tufts stained with the flickering colours of faded, archetypal carnations" (14). The two figures in the garden partake of the same equivocal, impressionistic quality that we see here in the description of the garden. The man is, "a stroke of black and yellow, ivory rather, in a silver landscape," and the young woman leads him "through the rambling maze, the carnation tones of her dress dragging through, catching on, fusing with those same carnations which she reflected, while absorbing something of their silver from the lavender and southernwood surrounding her." The couple exist in a charmed sphere of light. Joanie, as she spies on them, sees them: "Swathed in its translucent cocoon" (17).

She is "an eternally superfluous character" (17), as a frustrated lesbian, insecure tourist, and self-conscious nouveau-riche colonial. The enchanted couple are beyond her reach and the young woman represents all that is desirable, and unattainable. The whole episode lies in the

⁴ A. P. Riemer, 'Eddie and the Bogomils—Some Observations on *The Twyborn Affair*,' *Southerly*, 40, 1 (1980), 15.

ambiguous realm of memory and desire, a desire which reaches a climax in dream. Joanie, as she sits snoozing in her hotel room, allows "her mind to flicker amongst the tufts and wands of plants, the scents of evening, the silken swaths of colour with which the bay was strewn" (21). Her dream appears more real than her present ephemeral surroundings. She enters the house and is led by the young woman, "burrowing down passages the villa or cottage had failed to suggest to a common *voyeuse*," eventually being undressed by her and put into bed. Her dream represents, amongst other things, an attempt to enter an ideal sphere where her deficiencies are not revealed. The young woman in her dream has "terracotta, votive hands," from which she experiences "no response" (22), and a "terracotta face" from which she gets "little enough illumination." The whole dream episode has a remote, hieratic or ritualistic aspect. It exists between a failed attempt to write of her experiences to her friend Eadie Twyborn—she is "daunted by [an] exceptionally stylish comma" (20)—and her realisation, as she gazes again at the comma, that it might never be possible to write about such things. The sheets in her dream, between which she is helped by the desirable young woman, become the sheet of paper which she is using to write to her lesbian friend Eadie; a sheet which is blank except for the words "Dearest Eadie," followed by the troublesome comma. This section operates as a metaphor of the absence at the heart of writing; an absence wherein, as Wittgenstein suggests, meaning disappears due to the fact that we are enclosed within language. In this it is similar to Derrida's concept of writing, or arche-writing which "marks *the dead time* within the presence of the living present."⁵ Joanie's dream, in which is realised her hidden desires, takes place in the space between two attempts at writing. The whole first section of the novel leads to this void—this "dead time."

The comma worries her because it stands as a prelude to the blank page on which might be transcribed her innermost desires and feelings, revolving around her covert lesbianism. She is thus absent to herself since her identity is not founded on any unity. Indeed, as she pauses at the brink of this daunting space, she recalls an occasion when her friend Eadie Twyborn disguised herself as a man, and they went dancing together. It is this same blank space that has been filled by her dream. A confrontation with her being takes place within this space—this clearing.

⁵ Of *Grammatology*, 68.

However, her being is not constituted by unity, but by absence and by a relation in which there is an inevitable gap. This has about it the timeless quality of the moment of absolute being, in the sense used by Kierkegaard when he writes that: "An existing person has unquestionably found there the secure foothold outside existence where he can mediate—on paper" (C.U.P. 419). This is, however, a blank and has to be filled, not by any absolute, but by the stuff of existence itself, by Being (activity) rather than being (essence). It is against this blank background that a self shows up, however it shows up as it is projected out of this space into the scene in the winter garden of the hotel—into the flow of life. This clearing is surrounded by a series of adopted modes of behaviour, speech, and dress. These operate as a showing-forth of that being which appears *as* the absolute. Joanie, as voyeur, operates from outside this space. She is "superfluous" as she gazes at the "charmed lives" of the intriguing couple. There is only an issuing forth into the theatrical stage space of performance. This issuing forth is the process of becoming.

We see that this whole opening section of the novel is about both theatre and writing as the enclosure of the self within existence and language. The blank sheet of paper is a metaphor of the ambiguous space of sexuality, desire, and insecurity. We are told that "Joan Golson had accepted a whole vacillating illusion, romantically clothed and in its wrong mind" (183). The details of the scenes included here partake of this mixture of sensuality and uncertainty. Joanie is particularly uncomfortable about her Australian accent, and uses "vocabulary . . . somewhat tentatively abroad" (12-13). Her dream is suffused with this same uncertainty as: "She might have turned to thank him had she known in which language to communicate with her friends. So far, she realised, language had not mattered: they relied on touch, glances, and . . . smiles" (21). Later we are told that: "Language was what she could not sort out: perhaps it was the language of silence" (22). The space of the dream where Joanie is in the presence of the desired one is a metaphor of the absolute; of the moment of being. However, as Joanie enters back into life she enters into ambiguity. She enters into a sphere of non-presence since the enclosure of the self by the non-present structure of language takes the self away from an absolute ground.

As Kierkegaard argues, identity, as the unity of subject and object, can only be attained by abstracting from existence. Joanie's attempt at

writing can be seen as aimed at achieving this. Eudoxia, like Joanie, seeks an assurance for the validity of her life, which she intimates is as insubstantial as a ball of hair. She writes in her diary: "The fact that I sit here writing as I do, and *rereading what I have written* is evidence enough" (79). In other words, she too seeks substance and presence in her writing. As Derrida says, "is it not language itself that might seem to unify *life* and *ideality*?"⁶ The need to write and read and reread what has been written reveals the non-presence at the core of experience. The originating experience is never completely present, indeed, as Derrida argues, it is no origin at all since "the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is *continuously compounded* with a nonpresence and nonperception."⁷ Thus Eudoxia desires to lay hold of some kind of grounded presence paradoxically by escaping the present. By the end of *The Twyborn Affair*, as Eddie lies dying in a London air raid, and we see him ebbing away from his own hand, it is apparent that even on the threshold of death no final image of a self has been reached. Identity is a theatrical "base line." The self unfolds through a series of scenes which depict a number of selves, with no unity being arrived at, rather, a relationship. In existence identity is a point from which the self extends in the process of becoming. We see this in the final scene of the novel with the aged Eadie Twyborn sitting waiting for her rediscovered son/daughter, her "interchangeable failure" (431). The old woman muses: "Eadie said I must not fail Eadith now that I have found her Eadith Eddie no matter which this fragment of myself which I lost is now returned where it belongs" (431-432). The proposition that "Eadie=Eddie" (150) is very much a Heideggerean formula in which a relationship rather than a unity is suggested.

Some characters in White's fiction attempt to enter the unchanging forms of absolute being in their quest for redemption. Eddie "liked to think he was reserving himself for something ahead, and that he would emerge at last from the bombardment, not only of a past war, but the past" (133). The past, however, represents no origin, and thus no refuge, since it, along with his various selves, is a discursive formation. It is "an infernal game" (140). He tells an "old professional blue-nosed soak" (143) that he meets in a Fremantle pub that "I'm a kind of mistake trying to correct itself." In earlier novels that which had the quality of a quest for

⁶ *Speech and Phenomena*, 10.

⁷ *Speech and Phenomena*, 64.

the absolute, becomes in *The Twyborn Affair* a kind of pantomime, a theatrical performance. Eddie tells us that: "I sit and wait at a stained table. For a moment I am tempted to smear my throat and wrists with tomato sauce, snuffle it up through my nostrils, and fall across the table, some kind of Greek sacrifice crossed with an Australian fate—lie there for poor Con to find and misinterpret" (144). Eddie longs "for the reality of permanence" (179), a condition only to be found beyond the flow of existence, represented by the river and "the transience of its coursing waters." Set against this permanence is the changing self; a self caught in this existential flow. At lunch with his parents in Sydney he

was left with his own image in the glass on the opposite wall. He was surprised to find himself look as convincing as he did . . . For the reflection was already fluctuating, in the satin shoals, the watery waves of the mottled glass, as well as in his own mind. He was faced, as always, with an impersonation of reality (171-172).

This impersonating tendency reaches its apogée in Part Three where, in the guise of Eadith Trist "the inspired bawd" (323), she "started casting the play she had been engaged to direct" (321). This culminates at the end of the novel with the theatrically conceived death scene and the old woman in the garden. Eddie faces this final scene in a costume about which "there was too much hasty improvisation" (427). He still wears Eadith Trist's make-up in which to undertake a "role which he had played so many times" (428). The theatrical performance continues into the moment of death. The young soldier who approaches is a "character from a carnival or looney bin" (429), his tin hat becomes "no more than a cabaret prop." This whole section has an unreal air with its "beautiful aluminium insect" and "sticky feelers of light" (431), rounded off with the image of the bulbul with "his little velvet jester's cap" (432). In the precision of arrangement of items in this final scene, the angle of the bodies, for example, we can see the repeatable structure of theatrical form, of the set. The whole section can be seen as a theatre of the ultimate in which existence is played out, but to no final conclusion.

The theatrical elements here show that the becoming is not untrammelled, although it does not issue into the fixed forms of being. It is contained within the repeatable structure of theatre which offers a rhetoric of the absolute rather than the immutable forms of the transcendent itself. The theatrical, as a metaphor of existence, draws our attention towards the expressive role of the self and of identity. An

identity is not indicated since the theatrical, as I have argued, blurs the distinction between expression and indication. In existence the self is not present to the self, it "appears as an absent structure which is characterised by physical, sexual and social peculiarities."⁸ It must be disclosed to the self (thus the frequent occasions in which the characters in White's fiction view their reflected images), or played out in roles. The self becomes a series of fictions, in the same way that Derrida argues that signs are based on fiction since "every sign whatever is of an originally repetitive structure"⁹—we cannot distinguish the dress rehearsal ("fiction") from the first performance ("reality"). Just as the role is essentially repetitive, so too the self-structure is theatrical in nature.

There is, throughout the whole novel, a pattern of flight and escape; a movement which signals the novel's focus on the process of becoming. Eudoxia writes: "But I *must* escape" (80), and she flees at the end of Part One, escaping "into the night" (127) to resurface later as a young returning soldier on board a ship bound for Australia. She asks: "Can you escape into the past? Perhaps you can begin again that way. If you can escape at all" (80). As Eddie Twyborn living in Sydney, he had again literally run away, in this instance from the respectable confines of a society marriage. He is chased by Joanie Golson, his fugitive status fuelled by her intense and unwanted attention. Pursued with questions by his parents when he returns home he grasps at the idea "of going into the country. To work" (160). This is an "improbable idea" (161) at which Eddie himself is surprised. After working as a jackaroo he escapes from this imperfect idyll to become "swallowed up" (302), re-emerging several years later as Eadith Trist. Here he appears relatively becalmed and in control. However at the end he is still the fugitive, telling his assistant Ada that "I've decided to make the break tonight" (427), and becoming "a scapegoat again in search of sacrifice" (428). He ends, killed in an air-raid, "flowing onward, on to wherever the crimson current might carry him" (430).

In the course of this motion Eddie seeks stability, not so much in a coherent self, as in a set of relationships. A self shows out as it is thrown into relief by a particular background. Thus Eudoxia, the desirable young woman of Joanie Golson's fantasies, writing in her diary about her lover

⁸ Jean-Pierre Durix, 'Masks and travesties: *The Twyborn Affair* by Patrick White,' *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 4 (1979), 46.

⁹ *Speech and Phenomena*, 56.

Angelos says: "If I hate him at times it's because I hate myself. If I love him more deeply than I love E. it's because I know this other creature too well, and cannot rely entirely on him or her" (23). We see here an ambiguous self structure which is given stability through a relationship with another. Here, as with Joanie Golson, we have what appears to be a surface self, and an inner self. This inner self, here called "E" is unclear, it is "him or her." There is also an underlying uncertainty apparent in the lack of trust in this aspect of herself which mixes being with becoming. This ambiguity is the blank space of desire as a space of pure possibility. The coming into being of the self is a coming-into-being-as. It is this process that is the focus here, rather than the nature of the particular entities which cohere. In fact here the distinction between inner and outer self is blurred. It is the feature of existence as a spacing of thought and being that Kierkegaard refers to that is seen. Here the concept of relationship is connected to the concept of role. The roles that Eddie adopts are determined by the relationships that he enters into. Throughout the novel there may be seen a pattern of development wherein a measure of coherence is achieved through the assumption of a particular role, which is in turn a function of a particular relationship or set of relationships.

In the first part Eudoxia has little control over her life and is "created" by her lover Angelos. There is sense of a fractured self that coheres in relation to another. This is made clear as Eudoxia writes:

My thoughts were never a joy—only my body made articulate by this persuasive Greek. Then I do appear consecutive, complete, and can enjoy my reflection in the glass, which he has created, what passes for the real one, with devices like the spangled fan and the pomegranate shawl (27).

This sense of completeness and contiguity, which is seen reflected in a mirror, represents a coming-into-being-as, which sees a self shown up in a particular situation which has a theatrical air; that of a role which is here the transsexual lover of an elderly Greek. This is revealed more clearly as Eudoxia asks: "Why am I besotted on this elderly, dotty, in many ways tiresome Greek? I can only think it's because we have been made for each other, that our minds as well as our bodies fit, every bump to every cranny, and quirk to quirk" (23). We see here a kind of mirroring effect suggested. We also see the theatrical aspects, the costumes that are adopted as part of the playing of a role. The stage space shows up the

performer under a particular aspect. Eudoxia is, in a sense, the creation of her lover Angelos. She records in her diary that:

Nothing is mine except for the coaxing I've put into it. For that matter, nothing of me is mine, not even the body I was given to inhabit, nor the disguises chosen for it—A. decides on these, seldom without my agreement. The real E. has not yet been discovered, and perhaps never will be (79).

Angelos "has created the aesthetic version" (77) of Eudoxia, a version which has the characteristics of a theatrical role.

In the novel there are occasions when the idea of a stable inner core, which might suggest a metaphysically grounded identity, is alluded to. For example, Eudoxia writes in her diary: "I am only I—a plant too, but one the wind spins on its mooring" (65). Earlier, after a storm, she regards a large, old olive tree in the garden and reflects:

How enviable this olive tree encased in its cork armour, hardly a tremor in its gnarled arms, its downthrust roots firmly holding. To have such stability—or is oneself the strongest stanchion one can hope for? To realise this is perhaps to achieve stability (33).

Both these images are, however, suggestive of a relationship rather than inherent stability. The first quote is connected to the passage where she and Angelos are playing the piano together during the visit of the Golson's. Here they are seen "rocking and rocking on their stationary rockers" (106). Both are images of the relationship of stasis and movement, of being and becoming. Eddie's becoming is temporarily held in the stasis of his relationship with Angelos as Eudoxia. Thus his identity here is a function of Angelos's creative activity. The image of the olive tree is also non-essentialist. It has theatrical overtones in the "cork armour" in which it is enclosed, suggesting that its stability is that of role rather than essence. Also, Eudoxia is writing about herself, thus the image of the olive tree is itself encased in writing; a writing that is only a "release of a kind," because one cannot transcend language. Thus, it is that which encloses the image—the theatrical and language—which give it its meaning. The stability Eudoxia refers to is thus transitive and expressive rather than essential. The encasing is also one with the fatal tower that Eudoxia imagines herself shut up in (65). This is the tower of Angelos's fictions which both define and entrap Eudoxia. Thus the relationship with Angelos lies behind both these images and compromises any attempt to see them as suggestive of a metaphysically determined

identity structure.

Eudoxia's eyes, which are remarkably beautiful, also seem to suggest an enduring core to her identity. They are the feature which persists throughout as the identifying feature of the protagonist. Joanie Golson is disturbed by them as "they troubled memory, and with it most of the certainties of life" (56). They point to Eudoxia's identity as Eddie Twyborn, the son of Joanie's friend Eadie Twyborn, an identity not clearly revealed until Part Two. These eyes then, form part of the general background of ambiguity and unease which lies behind the whole novel, as well as suggesting some kind of core within the self-structure of Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith. Eudoxia

had the finest eyes Mrs Golson had ever seen: neither blue, nor grey, nor green, but a mingling of them all, changing probably according to mood or light. Her companion imagined how, on a day which loured less, the eyes of Madame Vatatzes might reflect the sun itself (49-50).

Later, as Eddie returns to Australia from the war on board a ship, he meets two young women. These two are fascinated by him, and in particular are struck by his remarkable eyes, which they take as hinting at an inner reality, here characterised as "purity". Immediately after they comment on this optical significance "the sun rent the slate-coloured awning between world and sky, and at once the waves were decked with an evening panoply of gold and hyacinth" (136). We see the relationship between these eyes and the sun imagined by Joanie Golson. Nature has a dramatic, theatrical quality here. "Inner" significance is projected outward onto the scenic backdrop becoming part of the theatrical structure. The distinction between inner and outer is thus blurred. These eyes, ostensibly indicative of an inner self, become part of the expressive medium of the self-role and the theatrical set. This echoes the earlier scene where Eudoxia swims in the ocean watched by M. Pelletier. There, "the anonymous being was lost in the fuzz of gold above the hyacinth sea" (76).

The theatrical is further suggested in a series of images of enclosure. These images are suggestive of a structure in which meaning appears as a showing-up within an enclosed space, as in the theatre where meaning shows up within the stage space. The apprehension of meaning is directed outward to a perimeter of surface detail. Meaning appears as a

showing-up on this surface. An example is the tennis court scene which occurs as Eudoxia and Angelos are out walking past "Beau Séjour" (28). The sound of some Americans playing tennis on a screened court triggers an irruption of the past into the present. The past scene which intrudes involves Eddie Twyborn's flight from his fiancé Marian Dibden during a tennis match in Sydney. The likely reason, Eddie's homosexuality, is suggested there in the homoerotic image of a tram's "extremities" flowering "with sprays of violet sparks" (29). This scene is riven with ambiguity. Full comprehension is withheld, only to be granted as more of the novel is read. This ambiguity suggests the subjective quality of existence, as it is not possible to comprehend fully, since the process of becoming undercuts the closure required for total comprehension. As Kierkegaard suggests, the condition of being in existence makes impossible the attainment of any perspective outside of existence from which to view the whole.

The scene also possesses a quasi-theatrical quality. This also lends the scene an air of containment and enclosure, as on a stage. The tennis court is just such an enclosed space; it is referred to later as "the ivied prison of a tennis court" (222) from which Eddie escapes. The characters in this enacted tableau are delineated by their exteriors. They are seen in frozen attitudes with "hemline stationary, racquet poised" (29). We see Marian's "enviably shallow blue eyes," along with her "sapphire engagement ring" as well as the "sinewy wrists" of the players. The characters act as though scripted; we are told that "it's *de rigueur* that an Australian girl of Marian's upbringing and class should giggle even when the roof is carried away." Marian's annoyance is conveyed by the carefully stage-managed effect of her driving the tennis ball against the ivied screen, thus startling the sparrows nesting inside. "The misdirected ball lands where nobody will ever discover it, "because it has gone beyond the stage-space and thus out of the reach of those who are confined within the scene.

The clarity of surface detail, which is a feature of this episode, is intensified as the action returns to the present. Eudoxia panics as she recalls the incident in Sydney and runs up the road to escape the cause of the recollection. Angelos then suffers a slight heart attack and Eudoxia runs back to help him. She records in her diary how:

Our bodies bump, skins flutter. We have seldom been closer than when seated together on a large porous stone at the roadside: grains of sand have become as enormous as pebbles, fern fronds were never more intricate, a single tender cyclamen is clinging by a crimson thread to the cleft in a rock. These, more than inadequate words, are our comfort, the embodiment and expression of our love (30).

Here we see a movement towards the surface of things, a surface which has become intensified and magnified. This is similar to Wittgenstein's statement that "meaning is a physiognomy" (*P.I.* sec. 568).¹⁰ Meaning shows up on the surface of things and is not to be discovered underlying this surface as an unchanging aspect of the world. In his discussion of meaning here he uses the example of a chess piece. In doing so he is concerned to discover whether there is any essential layer of meaning in a word. In the case of a chess piece its meaning can be said to be its *role* in the game. Here identity and meaning are related. The final court of appeal in deciding what is essential and inessential in the piece's meaning or role is not the rules of the game, but the game's point. That is, what must be taken into account is the total situation of chess playing, or the scenes in which this game is played. It turns out that the meaning of the chess piece is not to be discovered by directing attention inward to an irreducible essential core—to any immutable level constituted, for example, by rules—but by the opposite movement, outwards to the surface; to the entire scenario of the game's playing. It is thus in scenarios as a whole that meaning resides. The identity of the chess piece is its relationship to the other parts of a total scenario—meaning and identity are thus conflated in the concept of relationship. In the novel's first part Eudoxia has meaning as she is projected into scenes by her lover. Her essence lies in this extension on the surface of things. In Part Two Eddie's identity/meaning is played out in a relationship both with the land and a cast of other characters. Eadith, in Part Three, has meaning and identity as she erects a set in which to play out her life, a set in which, as in the theatre, all is open to view. Meaning here is expressive rather than indicative.

In Part One Eudoxia writes that: "Love is over-rated. Not affection – affection is to love what the minutiae are to living" (76-77). She also writes that she is basing her "doctrine of life" on "minutiae" (79). These include "the mauve-to-silver trail of the snail unaware that he's going to be

¹⁰ See sections 561-568.

crushed, the scrapings from the carrot which hasn't yet been sliced, the lovely long peeling from the flesh of the unconscious turnip" (77). She clings to these minutiae "as insurance against the domes of Byzantine deception" (175). The things she clings to are all characterised by immediacy, and by that condition of embeddedness leading to unawareness that is a feature of existence as becoming. It is to the minutiae that our attention is drawn here. It is these details that matter and that embody and express their love. These are aspects of the surface; a surface upon which is written the *whole* of their love. Affection is played out on this surface, and love and living operate as an extension on the surface of things. There is no underlying realm of meaning and no core of significance. Meaning is played out in scenes which are delineated by surface detail. What lies behind this is a relationship—that between Eudoxia and Angelos. They are in physical contact and "have seldom been closer" (30). The magnification of the minutiae is not an apprehension of being since these things are "the embodiment and expression" of love. Love is a characteristic of relationship, and it is relationship that is fundamental here.

The protagonist gains a greater measure of control over his life as he assumes the role of Eddie the jackaroo, though his identity is again theatrically conceived, and based on his relationship with those around him. At the beginning of Part Two in Fremantle where Eddie, looking at the inhabitants, reflects: "Oh, God, but I feel for them, *because I know exactly* – they are what I am, and I am they—interchangeable" (142), we see that he is constituted by his relationship to a whole range of people that he meets. Attending a dance later in this part held at the home of a wealthy grazier Eddie watches the dancers and reflects that he "had always been chosen, whirled out into the figures of the dance, whether by Marian, Angelos, Marcia, Mrs E. Boyd Joanie Golson; even his afflicted parents had attempted an unconscious twirl or two" (235). Yet he remains "the unpossessed" (168) and "the arch-outsider" (385). In both these aspects he is like Ellen Roxburgh in *A Fringe of Leaves*. Eddie is constituted by relationships in which the two parts are held together, while at the same time held apart. The image of the dance encapsulates this idea, and as with Lotte Lippman's dance in *The Eye of the Storm*, it is a structure constituted by the lineaments of theatre; a form in which there is at once an engagement and a detachment.

When Eddie Twyborn discusses his intention to work as a jackaroo with his parents, he sees "it as Eddie Twyborn escaping from himself into a landscape;" one which "would respond, the brown, scurfy ridges, fat valleys opening out of them to disclose a green upholstery, the ascetic forms of dead trees, messages decipherable at last on living trunks" (161). In this part of the novel Eddie comes into focus as a man. A self appears as it shows up against the background of the Monaro and its society. At first he is "insufficiently rehearsed" (176), and he wonders: "Would he ever succeed in making credible to others the new moleskins and elastic sides?" (183). As he adapts to his new lifestyle we are told that: "He was coming to terms with his body. He had begun to live in accordance with appearances" (201). Notice the direction in which identity flows here. The identity of the self is dictated by the surface of things; not vice versa. A self is read off from the background against which it appears. A self is disclosed in a letting be that is not a representation, but a relationship. Later:

He considered whether to take his stick, which by now he scarcely needed for physical support, then decided on it, more in the nature of a theatrical prop. . . Looking at the reflection of himself in the glass he had begun to convince himself of an existence which most others seem to take for granted (212).

Eddie is not constituted as an as-such which perdures essentially. He is constituted by a structure of perception in which he comes into focus as a certain kind of person. He is "the pale ghost of what people took to be Eddie Twyborn" (185). In being taken-for, or seen-as, that which he is we see that in this section of the novel he enters the theatre of manhood and plays out the role of the virile jackaroo.

His relationship with Marcia Lushington is a vital part of his attempt to assume the identity of a man. We have also seen that he enters into a relationship with the land. It is significant that Marcia herself is like the landscape. The manager, Prowse, had told Eddie that she was "'more of the land'," and we are informed that: "He might not have agreed had he not experienced the vast undulating Monaro, and if, on the way to dinner, he had not brushed against an old natural-wool cardigan hanging from a hook under a hat in stained, dead-green velour" (216). The search for an identity that Eddie is engaged in is based on his relationship both with the land and with Marcia. The "practically breathing" contours of the land are a direct link to Marcia's voluptuous form. They are complimentary

aspects of identity-as-relationship. They also link to the disclosure of meaning, as the landscape which "would respond . . . to disclose a green upholstery . . . messages decipherable at last," is linked to Marcia herself, and through her to Eddie and his attempts to give shape and meaning to his life.

Eddie's relationship with Marcia Lushington is essentially physical. Following a night spent with her he asks: "Was he a masochist as a man? He didn't think so. He would have been had he loved her; he wanted to love, and might still, somewhere in the geography of flesh, come across the wherewithal for kindling its spirit" (240). Marcia and the land are here specifically conflated in the word "geography". Thus love, as in the episode between Eudoxia and Angelos just alluded to, is to be apprehended as a result of an exploration of the surface of things, which, in turn, implies a ranging across a terrain rather than any flash of revelation. Also involved here is a relationship with another who is both the land and a human being. The phrase "the geography of flesh" is at once a metaphor for the process of meaning as surface extension—as a "physiognomy"—and a literal image for that affectionate touching of the flesh of another that Eudoxia referred to. Meaning is played out as if on a stage. This kind of articulating space is often suggested in White's final four novels by images of enclosure and encirclement.

Another scene suggestive of this kind of interpretation occurs once more between Eddie and Marcia. The two are together in the Lushington homestead at night after Greg, Marcia's husband, has gone to bed. Eddie finds himself "lusting after Marcia's female forms" (221). They appear contained and enclosed within a circle of light and "the diminishing circles of warmth inside the room." She leads him to her bedroom and the two bump together in a way reminiscent of the earlier scene between Angelos and Eudoxia. After spending the night together Eddie prepares to go but "he was won over by a voice wooing him back into childhood" (222) and "was drawn back to Marcia by the bright colours of retrospect." Marcia, for her part, "would have liked to imprison him in her womb." The sound of her husband getting ready for the day parts them and Eddie "withdrew into the outer cold . . . in an attempt to establish his own masculine identity" (223). He heads for his own lodging in the light of the false dawn. As he walks along:

He suspected that salvation most likely lay in the natural phenomena surrounding those unable to rise to the spiritual heights of a religious faith: in his present situation the shabby hills, their contours practically breathing as the light embraced them, stars fulfilled by their logical dowsing, the river never so supple as at daybreak, as dappled as the trout it camouflaged, the whole ambience finally united by the harsh but healing epiphany of cockcrow.

As in the earlier tennis court scene there is a sense of enclosure in the "natural phenomena" which surrounds Eddie, followed by a heightened apprehension of the surface of the world. Here "salvation" is seen to reside in these surface forms. The scene may appear to have metaphysical overtones, but this suggestion is a function of the physical properties of the scene itself. Eddie appears to be absorbed in this landscape, just as the distant stars are absorbed into the surface of the river. This absorption leads to a heightened apprehension of the surface of things in which significances appear as a function of this surface-directedness. The hills, with their "contours practically breathing," take us back to Marcia and to the relationship between her and Eddie as the "ground" upon which this "epiphany" is based. This delineation of identity and meaning within the scenes of life culminates in the final section of the novel where meaning is almost entirely extended on the surface.

"Lust" becomes the key word here as it pertains to an apprehension of the surface, and as a manifestation of pure physicality. Indeed, the whole novel can be seen as a meditation on lust. Lust appears, from Angelos Vatzatzes to whom Eudoxia is "committed by fate and orgasm—never love" (36), to Don Prowse and Marcia Lushington and their lust for Eddie and each other, to Eadith's brothel in the final section, a veritable theatre of lust, where the patrons are "lusting to be consumed" (332). During the description of the brothel that Eadith runs, we are told of peepholes that have been installed in order for her to spy on the lustful activities of her clients. "She would have liked to believe that, even if it did not purify, lust might burn itself out, and at the same time cauterise that infected part of the self which, from her own experience, persists like the core of a permanent boil" (329). We also hear that: "In certain circumstances lust can become an epiphany" (417). Essential aspects are suggested here for the word "lust," yet in the first instance it is therapeutic, and thus part of a process—of becoming—and in the second the word "circumstances" alerts us to the contingent aspect which is suggested here. Love/lust appears as it is shown up against the background of the scenes

in which it features. The novel consists of a series of theatrical scenes in which love in its various forms is displayed, and the word shown to have, in Wittgenstein's phrase, "a family of meanings" (*P.I.* sec. 77).

In the final part, as Eadith the ageing Madam, she gains a much greater degree of control over her life, constructing a whole world over which she presides. She becomes herself a Byzantine deceiver. Her brothel is theatrically conceived, as is her life. This is suggested initially by the opening of this section where we see Eadith's operations from the point of view of an audience, the elderly "Bellasis girls" (307) in the house opposite. These sisters have "settled down to the humdrum of living, hardly life, in which they no longer had a part, except as extras stationed at a window, waiting for the real actors to appear" (309). Eadith's life has a fictional quality, she affects

a *grain de beauté* on her left cheekbone, a punctuation mark in the novelette she enjoyed living as much as the one Evadne Schumacher, the cook-novelist at the house across the street, was obsessed to write. Perhaps it was Evadne who had conceived the additional conceit of the violet cachou Eadith took to chewing when got up in her purple drag (310).

Here we see that Eadith is, in part, constituted by a relationship with another, the absent "crypto-novelist" Evadne Schumacher, who "came up with what one could hardly refer to as the woman's 'Christian' name" (308). Identity here has a fictional quality and is tied to a relationship with language. Fiction here is, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, "offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the post-modern novel."¹¹

Eadith reflects that "whatever form she took, or whatever the illusion temporarily possessing her, the reality of love, which is the core of reality itself, had eluded her, and perhaps always would" (336). The particular model of reality suggested here might be seen as running counter to that which has been argued above. However, she refers to love as "that great ambivalence" (311) to which she had never aspired. On one occasion Eadith visits Maisie, an aged whore of her acquaintance, who is sick. Maisie asks the question: "'Love isn't what it's cracked up to be, love – or is it?' Eadith did not know how to answer, except by sternly mopping up

¹¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Post-Modernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), 40.

Maisie's incontinence, and flushing its more solid parts down a grey and reluctant lavatory on a lower landing" (362). Attention here must be directed towards the scenic aspects of this episode with Eadith performing an action which embodies love and which in fact provides a complete answer to Maisie's question. We see that love, as an immutable core of reality, may elude Eadith, but that in proving elusive it evades confinement in an essential definition. It is only as it issues into the scenes of everyday life that it acquires substance and meaning; only as it acquires the characteristics of a physiognomy rather than a core that it has significance.

"Love" is defined by its role in the scenes in which it exists. The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (Flora Manhood's "unreadable nut"?) writes that: "Love seeks with fury, through the medium of the beloved, something beyond, and since it finds it not, it despairs."¹² Here we see the search for a core of love as a theatrical performance revolving around a relationship with another; a search that does not lead to any realisation of the absolute. The emphasis here is on the existential rather than transcendent state. Love eludes precisely because it lies on the surface: the expression of Eadith's being is the expression of her love, it is thus too close to be "seen." Her life has been based on fantasies which form a kind of structure giving shape to her existence:

As she tramped the Embankment, her hand skimming the parapet between herself and the river, she was touching Gravenor's squamous skin: the ignoble lord, her would-be and rejected lover, who might have wrecked the structure of life by overstepping the limits set by fantasy (322).

Here we see a view of reality which is similar to that offered by Foucault in *Madness and Civilisation*. There he writes that, in relation to the symptoms of madness:

What was constituted, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, under the influence of images, was therefore a perceptual structure The essential thing is that the enterprise did not proceed from observation to the construction of explanatory images; that on the contrary, the images assured the initial role of synthesis, that their organising force made possible a structure of perception, in which at last the symptoms could . . . be organised as the visible presence of the truth.¹³

¹² Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans., J. E. Crawford Flitch (Dover Publications, 1954), 132.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans., Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 135. This view is allied to Wittgenstein's view of propositions, quoted earlier.

What is suggested here is an inversion which denies any solid ground. Truth is not an absolute as is also suggested in Heidegger's concept of truth as Being-uncovering. In White's novel fantasy is seen as the basis on which life's structure is built. These fantasies are based on appearance, which creates images, and which, in turn, control perception. These images can be compared to the scenes in which Eadith's fantasies are acted out. They too form a structure of perception through which a version of "reality" can be seen, just as the theatre erects a perceptual structure enabling reality-effects to appear. Eadith's identity is founded on just such a structure of perception based on the roles she assumes, or the images that she adopts. Her being is constructed by her identity—her roles.

The gap which existence creates between subject and object, and thought and being, opens up the necessity for disclosure as the basis of meaning. As Kierkegaard wrote in the quote included earlier, "the drawing is the main thing." Meaning is thus based on a showing forth. This is not to be confused, however, with the modernist epiphany, where some kind of ultimate truth is revealed. In "disclosure" things show up because they are seen against a background. This background is not permanent since it consists of shifting contextual situations. It is scenic in a theatrical sense. It is the structure of the role that causes a showing up which is a showing-up-as. This is apparent in the episode in which Eadith encounters Philip Thring, the young homosexual son of a client. She guesses the nature of his sexuality and:

The tremulous mirror he was offering her must have reflected the sympathy she felt for this boy. More than that: they were shown standing together at the end of a long corridor or hall of mirrors, which memory becomes, and in which they were portrayed stereoscopically, refracted, duplicated, melted into the one image, and by moments shamefully distorted into lepers or Velasquez dwarfs (400).

Seen in this "hall of mirrors" they take on the aspects of the theatrical role rather than the immutable form of essential identity. It is this same relationship that we see earlier, in Part Two, as Eddie prepares to head off by himself to escape Joanie Golson. He tells the manager of his intention, then:

Eddie and Don stood looking at each other from opposite ends of the brown passage.

'See, Eddie? *I* won't hold anything against yer.'

There was a whispering of dry-rotten woodwork, a dull protest from warped lino, the scratching, almost like spirit-writing, of hawthorn spines on glass. Prowse didn't approach any closer, but steamed outward, it seemed.

... Eddie and Don understood each other in the brown, dry-rotted passage, while Peggy Tyrrell seared the mutton in a cavern beyond concern (271).

In both these passages we see identity, and in particular, sexual identity, as constituting a structure of perception. We see a sexual structure, suggested by the "brown passage", at opposite ends of which Eddie and Prowse stand. Their identity is thus constituted by a relationship, which is in turn articulated by a sexually charged perceptual structure. Identity here fulfills an expressive rather than an indicative function. Here the self is represented to the self through an intermediary structure which is constituted by the total scene in which the self appears. It is identity which is at bottom and which gives rise to the perceptual structure in which "being" appears.

We see this illustrated by a scene from Part One of the novel in which Eudoxia, intending suicide, goes swimming in the sea immediately after a storm. She is spotted by Monsieur Pelletier, the owner of a seaside kiosk, who becomes obsessed with the identity of the distant and enigmatic figure. He is particularly unsure of the sex of this person. He sees himself "as the focal point of all existence" (71). It is perception and its relationship to identity that is signalled here. His stance is ironic rather than absolute—"there was no real reason why Monsieur Pelletier should exist." Thus freed from essential foundations the whole scene acts as a metaphor of the ungroundedness of perception within existence. The whole episode is fraught with anxiety and ambiguity, intensified by news of the approaching war. Indeed, "the equivocal nature of the scene made Monsieur Pelletier shiver worse than ever" (73). As he watches her "poised on a rock above the sea" we are told that: "Because a romantic, Monsieur Pelletier saw the naked flesh as white marble, or perhaps ivory overlaid with the palest gold leaf." His perception is determined by his identity, which is in turn determined by his situation in life. He stands watching her swim: "It must be a man, Monsieur Pelletier decided, and yet there was a certain poetry of movement, a softness of light surrounding the swimmer, that seduced him into concluding it could only be a woman" (74). The "poetry of movement" and the "softness of light" which M. Pelletier perceives is not a function of any reality independent of

his existence—his Being—but of that Being. He is a "romantic" and thus his perception is determined by this identity. Further, in being "seduced," he is given over to the play of appearances rather than to the presence of immutable forms.

He begins to spin on his heels and then to masturbate furiously inside his trousers.

Strangely, it did not occur to Aristide Pelletier that the emotions the swimmer aroused in him might have been occasioned by lust . . . Whether the swimmer were the young wife of the crazy Greek or some unknown woman or youth, neither physical passion, nor even a burst of lust, could enter into a relationship which presented itself as a tremulous abstraction, and which must remain remote from his actual life. In one sense disgusting, his regrettable act of masturbation seemed to express a common malaise, his own and that of the swimmer headed for the open sea, as well as a world despair gathering in the sea-damp newspapers (76).

Here we see a spreading out of significance from a particular act; a particular scene, into a broader context, the "common malaise" occasioned by the coming war. Identity here is not innate, but is a function of the general context of the scene; it is something conferred, or assigned according to a changing situation. There is a sense of space and of distance. Eudoxia is a distant and ambiguous object and emotions and ideas blur and assume the same vague contours as do the details of the scene. Finally:

As the swimmer, as the light, as the colour returned, what could have remained a sordid ejaculation became a triumphant leap into the world of light and colour such as he craved from the landscape he knew, the poetry he had never written . . . He had forgotten the swimmer, who had by now climbed out, glittering with archetypal gold and silver, of light and water-life in fact (76).

The "archetypal"—the absolute—becomes "life"—the contingent. The distinction between these two is blurred. Later, Eudoxia records in her diary that she had intended to escape her present situation by suicide, and that she had taken her early morning plunge with this intention in mind. However, the sea into which she dives consists of "healing water" (80). In a sense the two, M. Pelletier and Eudoxia, converge; doing so in a momentary relationship in which despair turns to hope for each of them as Eudoxia swims back to the shore. Spatial relationships are conflated as in the theatre—when the distant figure of Eudoxia dives into the water M. Pelletier is splashed by a wave "more emotional than the majority" (73). Lust conflates with poetry—"At the actual moment when Monsieur

Pelletier came in his pants, the light struck through . . . the sky . . . so that the waves were streaked with violet and the hyacinth of their normal plumage was restored" (74)—death with life as the scene records a coming-into-being which blurs meaning and operates as a metaphor of existence itself. Significance here is a movement away from identity as constituted by unity and towards an idea of identity as constituted by relationships which are played out against the extended backdrop of public events. Meaning and identity are based on a showing-forth across the surface of things.

White's fiction has been taken to consist of an intriguing surface overlaying an immutable level of meaning. Hal Porter, for example, writes:

There are, even beneath the most glazed longueurs, startling flashes, alert shadows, movement. There is life of a sort in the way that there is life of a sort in a mosaic of little mirrors sewn on a dark and suffocating blanket which is being agitated, bulged upwards, sucked inwards, tormented by the antics of the Form (or Forms) beneath it.¹⁴

In this view the surface of the prose suggests meaning, a meaning which is directed towards whatever lurks beneath the surface, a sub-stratum which is shrouded in mystery. As Wittgenstein says, "they see in the essence, not something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement, but something that lies *beneath* the surface" (*P.I.* sec. 92). Like Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector* this view sees White as striving after the unnameable and thus entering the modernist camp. But Porter was writing before the publication of *The Twyborn Affair*, and it may be reasonable to suggest that the "dark and suffocating blanket" of White's prose has here become merely a rather sweaty sheet. I want to go further, however, and suggest that, with respect to this novel, meaning operates in a different way and in a different direction from that which is suggested by the view just quoted. Rather than proceeding from an underlay towards an articulating surface, meaning operates as pure extension across the surface of things. It is displayed, and in this it parallels theatrical forms.

David Tacey writes, in relation to part three of *The Twyborn Affair*

¹⁴ Hal Porter, in *Contemporary Novelists*, James Vinson ed. (London and Chicago: St. James Press, 1972), 1372.

that: "It is not simply, as I have heard argued, that White is withholding interiority and keeping us at the surface, but that his fiction has lost interiority."¹⁵ The whole concept of the interiority of meaning is one which I wish to challenge. That feature of White's fiction—surface directedness—which I highlight is, I would argue, a necessary consequence of the writing of existence-as-becoming. In existence the self is always already in the interior, in that it is enclosed in the process of becoming; a process that it cannot transcend. The distinction between surface and interior is thus rendered problematic. Existence is a condition of immediacy, and in this condition the surface becomes significant: a significance in which there is no distinction between appearance and reality, nor the transcendent and the mundane.

Porter's view just quoted would see surface reality as being grounded on some underlying level of truth. Uncertainty is to be abhorred, yet the view I take would suggest that in the writing of existence any position outside of existence, which is necessary for an apprehension of the truth, is denied. The world is given over to a flux in which a shifting surface undermines certainty. *The Twyborn Affair* reflects Baudrillard's assertion that: "Nothing is less certain today than sex, behind the liberation of its discourse. And nothing today is less certain than desire, behind the proliferation of its images."¹⁶ *The Twyborn Affair* is grounded on uncertainty and ambiguity. This enacts the existential dilemma of being embroiled in existence, in a process of becoming which the existing individual cannot transcend. Things show up, or are invested with meaning, because they lack any innate meaning-content and are never simply and immutably there. White places us under the blanket and we are in a state like Heidegger's Being-in-the-world. White's characters exist in a state of enclosedness, not in the sense of being fixed and unchangeable, but in the sense of being in a state of becoming which denies them any objective position. Like actors they are enclosed by roles and the stage space.

Also, in existence it is language that encloses the subject. Veronica Brady writes that "White sees himself as living in language as others see

¹⁵ David Tacey, *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), 196.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans., Brian Singer (London: Macmillan, 1990), 5.

themselves as living in society."¹⁷ Wittgenstein made a similar point when he wrote that: "In giving explanations I already have to use language full - blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this by itself shews that I can adduce only exterior facts about language" (*P.I.* sec. 120). Wittgenstein believed language to be the universal medium,¹⁸ in much the same way that Kierkegaard sees existence as being all pervasive. In his unpublished manuscripts he wrote that:

Since one expresses oneself only in a given language system and since one therefore can explain only in this system what a sentence means, eventually meanings disappear totally from the language and hence from consideration, and the only thing we can consider remains the language [itself].¹⁹

The system as a whole forms a background against which significances appear: not because of what they contain in themselves (their meaning), but because of what surrounds them—the total system. According to this view language, like existence, encloses us and we cannot transcend the system of language in order to apprehend any final meaning. Meaning, as final and immutable meaning, disappears because it cannot be seen within the system. Significances do appear, but do so as they show up against the background of a system that cannot be transcended. This is analogous to Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* where:

The theory of practice as practice insists, contrary to positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the *habitus*, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions.²⁰

Thus significances show up under particular conditions, there being no underlying or innate stratum of meaning. Identity is here constituted by writing which, since it does not form a structure of unifying presence, can be characterised as a relationship.

This theatricality and surface-directedness which is such a feature of this novel is not a synonym of shallowness. On the contrary, there is

¹⁷ Veronica Brady, 'Patrick White and Literary Criticism,' *Australian Book Review*, 133 (August 1991), 9.

¹⁸ Merrill B. Hintikka and Jaakko Hintikka, *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 16-19.

¹⁹ As quoted in Hintikka and Hintikka, 19.

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans., Richard Nice (California: Stanford University Press, 1980), 53.

made possible here a richness of meaning that outstrips that which obtains in the essentialist models. "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses" (*P.I.* sec. 18). As Wittgenstein's image suggests, our language has the richness and diversity, as well as the surface-directedness, of an ancient city. This analogy may be appositely applied to *The Twyborn Affair*. "Meaning" here has a different meaning from the models which see it as subsisting in a relationship of correspondence or connection between language and a world of unified entities. It is analogous to Wittgenstein's notion that meaning is use (*P.I.* sec. 43) and a physiognomy, in that meaning is expressive rather than indicative. Expression is an aspect of performance and the theatre. It is a (dis)playing and a playing-out, not in any frivolous sense, but in the sense that rhetoric is playful and yet serious.

Chapter 5

The Gourmet of Language

In *Riders in the Chariot* Himmelfarb speaks of the chariot of redemption. This is an object of mystical knowledge; a knowledge which is, however, incomplete: he "cannot begin to see the expression of the faces."¹ In *Memoirs of Many in One* Alex confronts a "miraculous Being" (139); a being whose face is obscured, like those riding the chariot in the former novel. In *Riders in the Chariot*: "Each of the four main characters comes to be seen as a Rider in the fiery Chariot of God."² In *Memoirs of Many in One* the image of the faceless Being is transformed into a snapshot of Alex herself; a snapshot with a blurred head, which "could be anybody's" (140). In both novels the transcendent leads back to the questing self, although the nature of this self is quite different in the later novel. In *Memoirs of Many in One* the self has a fluid and ambiguous quality not apparent in the earlier book. Further, as is a significant feature of the previous three novels, it has the quality of a theatrical role.

In *Riders in the Chariot* the self has a coherence and a solidity which anchors the text and renders it more amenable to the yielding up of answers to fundamental questions. This is suggested in a scene where Himmelfarb

was roused from sleep, during the leaden hours, to identify a face. And got to his feet, to receive the messenger of light, or resist the dark dissembler. When he was transfixed by his own horror. Of his own image, but fluctuating, as though in fire or water. So that the long-awaited moment was reduced to a reflection of the self. In a distorting mirror. Who, then, could hope to be saved? Fortunately, he was prevented from shouting the blasphemies that occurred to him, because his voice had been temporarily removed . . . He could only struggle and sway inside the column of his body (136-137).

¹ Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 136. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

² John Colmer, *Patrick White*, 43.

The moment of revelation is reduced to the self. This points to the identity of Himmelfarb as one of the mystical Riders. The moment arises as an answer to the question as to their identity which had troubled Himmelfarb earlier. Paradoxically, it is this self which stands as a barrier to the moment of reconciliation with the infinite. If Himmelfarb feels damned because he is what he is, Alex's protean nature enables her to escape, "the column of [her] body," in which Himmelfarb is condemned to, "struggle and sway."

Marked differences exist when these two scenes are compared. While Himmelfarb is, to a degree, distorted in the mirror—his image is only "fluctuating"—Alex is transformed, or rendered open to transformation. The respective changes seem to be not so much different in degree, but in kind. Himmelfarb remains Himmelfarb, while Alex's image, "could be anybody's." The difference here has much to do with the role that Alex plays as a creator of the textual world in which she lives. She has the attributes of pure potential because, as a writer, she is in a position to say of those in her life that: "I know them all. I am them all" (52). This produces a different kind of emphasis. In the earlier novel the emphasis is on the conditions necessary to attain a state of grace; in the latter novel the focus falls between the structures of the absolute onto existence itself; existence as a process of becoming, as a kind of theatre. Himmelfarb is an historically fixed person in a way that Alex is not, despite the references to her Greek past, which, significantly, is characterised as a "*Levantine script*" (16) (*italics mine*).

The concerns of *Riders in the Chariot* tend towards the apprehension of the ultimate, while in *Memoirs of Many in One* the question of the meaning of Being is more pressing. To examine this claim more thoroughly a closer consideration of the episode involving Alex and the "miraculous Being" will be instructive. As with Himmelfarb's encounter quoted above, Alex's experience has about it the quality of a mirror image. The Being kneels opposite Alex, "in exactly the same position" (138-139). Its head, and thus its identity, is obscured by glare. In the section immediately following this Alex's fellow actors either fail to see or recognise her. She wonders whether the glare might not be responsible. She then picks up the snapshot with the blurred head. We see that Alex and the miraculous Being

have, in a sense, merged, as if they are complementary sides of a single mirror image. The two are, at least, held together in a relationship; a relationship which cuts across any claim they may have to being discrete entities.³

This relationship is a distorted one, as it is for Himmelfarb. However, any unity is ruptured in Alex's case when the miraculous Being becomes conflated, not just with Alex herself, but with Patrick as well; the editor of the memoirs in which the incident is recorded. In other words, we do not see here a pure reflection of the self, but one which is hybridised. This idea appears plausible when we look at the description given of the miraculous Being. It has smooth dark thighs and it takes on the characteristics of some primitive source of knowledge and strength. Later Alex becomes possessed with the word "glabrous" (162). She means to "taste it thoroughly when I get back to my writing." Alone in the darkened theatre she is confronted by an "abyss of light" (164) which recalls the metallic light which swings at her on the empty outback plain. She writes: "Hang on to something. Must. Think glabrously. The glabrous shaman. No such thing. But the word could be accommodated. Some. Where. . . . I must resign myself. Patrick will be the spirit guide at the great seance." Patrick is the "glabrous shaman" as he takes on the role of Alex's spirit guide. We see a link back to the smooth thighed miraculous Being encountered earlier. Patrick, Alex tells us, "is in search of the unanswerable, the unattainable" (88). Both he and Alex are "the explorers" (89). Alex's transition from the hotel to the glaring plain can be seen as Voss's journey compressed into a few minutes. She, like Voss, enters a country of the mind; one in which she is "stranded on the shores of memory and the detritus of what I imagine as a future" (57). Here there are no fixed points, but a continuing process of exploration.

We can see from this that the Being Alex encounters is not transcendent. It is not in fact an entity, but a segment of a relation.

³ A similar merging is suggested, through the same image of the blurred snapshot, in 'The Age of a Wart,' *Three Uneasy Pieces*, 56. Here the blurring of the snapshot suggests the unity of humankind, as the story ends with the assertion that "it is no longer I it is we" (59). My interpretation would see this as revealing the Heideggerean identity in relationship which undercuts any notion of a metaphysical unity.

Here we see again a concept of identity that has much in common with the way Martin Heidegger conceived of identity. We also see that White, like Heidegger, is concerned with existence rather than with the metaphysical nature of entities. This is reinforced as he designates the object of Alex's vision a "miraculous *Being*," (italics mine) as opposed to a "being." In encountering this "miraculous Being" Alex enters into a relationship with herself, and with Patrick, her editor. No ground or origin has been reached since Being, or existence, is characteristic of this identity as a relation. Alex's identity as a performer and as a writer is paramount. These are activities and as such they articulate processes which signify existence, or the process of becoming. These activities link her to Patrick the editor, and through Patrick, to Patrick White the novelist. The blurred snapshot becomes a sign, not of any identity, but of difference. It is this difference which opens Alex to the flow of existence, and prevents her being caught in any moment of unity. *Memoirs of Many in One* is no mere parodic or ironic exercise. In it there is a kind of inversion which is similar to the Heideggerean inversion. In removing the epistemological ground White opens up our view to identity as a relation, rather than as the unity of a thing with itself. He extends those ungrounded structures which he explored in *The Twyborn Affair*.

Lying at bottom here is not any firm ground which may be labelled a self, or reality; rather, if there is any ground, it is language, (here the word "glabrous"). That this ground exists in an indeterminate state is suggested by the broken syntax of "Some. Where." The word may be found a place, or "accommodated," but not amongst the fixed entities of space/time. We have been introduced, not to an entity, but to a process; the process of writing, and writing as a kind of gourmandising. This is an activity that has sensual pleasure as its goal rather than the attainment of knowledge. Following her theatrical tour of the outback, Alex sits in conversation with Patrick and Hilda. She tells them: "I met some entrancing kids," and Patrick in his editorial remarks notes that, "her teeth masticating the term were those of a true gourmet of language" (143). We are also reminded that she says that she means to "taste" the word "glabrous."

The use of the word "gourmet" in connection with words seems to emphasise the physicality of language, and this may seem to suggest

that language is being viewed as an entity. However, it is not the physicality of words themselves which is suggested here, it is rather the physicality of the process of writing; the activity of wordplay. Alex informs us that she is protecting herself, "by cultivating this jungle of words" (51). She says that she will not be investigated "if I plait the branches densely enough." The emphasis falls squarely on the activities described, rather than on the actual content of the written material. She tells her daughter Hilda that: "Words are what matter. Even when they don't communicate" (86). In other words, the sensual aesthetic aspects are most important. The two activities of writer as gourmet and actor are linked. Alex tells a taxi driver that she has to discover the reason for her presence on earth, "by writing out – acting out my life" (157). As Hena Maes-Jelinek writes: "White [sees] the individual consciousness, particularly the artist's, as a theatre and a vessel."⁴

The flow of performance, which is also the flow of writing, prevents the realisation of any union with the infinite. In Alex's performances archetypes are often invoked, but it is the performance itself which is paramount. Before her ostensibly mystical encounter in the outback she performs for the locals at Ochtermochty. She strides onto the stage in her, "midnight robe" (136), and enters into a state of, "correspondence with the galaxy" (137). She sheds her robe and dances naked conjuring "up the archetypes of birds, serpents, insects." Finally she sinks "down exhausted . . . into the earth from which we have come and to which we shall return." This forms a prelude to the encounter with the miraculous Being of the following day. In this performance we see a loss of identity, and a union with the heavens—"the galaxy"—on the one hand, and with the earth on the other.

This has been the realisation of a theatre of transcendence. It is a metaphysical performance, with the emphasis squarely on the word "performance." It is a performance which is in line with Heidegger's characterisation of metaphysics as "Onto – Theological."⁵ That is, of being concerned with, on the one hand, the most general ground

⁴ Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Last Flight to Byzantium: *Memoirs of Many in One*,' *Australian Literary Studies*, 15, 2, 176.

⁵ See, 'The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics,' in *Identity and Difference*, 54.

common to all entities, Being, and with the highest particular being, God, on the other. The subsequent meeting with the "miraculous Being" is a performance as well. There is the same stripping away of the self as occurred in the previous evening's dance. Here Alex becomes nothing: "Not even an insect. Louse fallen from a bird's wing. Grain of mica" (138). The birds which, "skitter across the desert," and "rise by grace of a stately basketwork of wings," recall the archetypal creatures which Alex evoked in her earlier performance. The bare plain onto which she walks is a stage; the light, bright and glaring, is stage lighting. She is revitalised by an encounter with an obscured being; obscured much as the audience at a theatrical performance is obscured by the glare of the foot lights. The revitalisation is much the same as the uplift an actor receives from an appreciative audience. These two episodes: the performance at Ochtermochty, and the mystical encounter can be seen, then, as part of a continuum of performance. The meeting of the miraculous Being is as much a part of her theatrical tour as are her more obvious performances. Rodney Edgecombe is disconcerted by this and finds that "the very status of the vision as part of an imaginary experience, calls its restorative function into question."⁶ It may be reasonably argued however, that what is called into question here are the metaphysical assumptions—the difference between appearance and reality, for example—upon which such judgments are based.

What has been revealed in the encounter with a "miraculous Being?" Do we see an identity as in the case of Himmelfarb? The transcendent has been short-circuited. There appears to be no linear progression from the mundane to the other-worldly. Alex views a being whose identity is not contained in any moment of recognition, but a being whose identity is extended through herself and her life to Patrick, with whom she shares the role of creator. Alex reflects, in relation to her son Hal, that:

All mothers think their sons have issued from their wombs. A son like Hal would never admit this, and I am ready to agree. We have never had this conversation and I expect we never shall. I might have it with old Patrick, who was, I suppose, my collaborator in, not so much inventing Hal, for I cannot deny he originated as Hilary's sperm, but as creators of the finished wretch. He was what Patrick and I both looked for as part of our complicated, many-faceted lives (53).

⁶ Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, *Vision and Style in Patrick White: A Study in Five Novels* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 159.

Alex merges with Patrick as she writes: "I, who have no need of any media bounty, remain afraid. I have been everywhere. I know all. Am all, I am the Creator" (166). Patrick echoes Alex in the epilogue as he in turn writes: "While I I – the great creative ego – had possessed myself of Alex Gray's life when she was still an innocent girl and created from it the many images I needed to develop my own obsessions, both literary and real" (192). These two are linked together as part of a process; a process which denies any clear ground on which to base essentialist claims.

The invocation of archetypes that we see in many of Alex's performances may suggest some kind of ground, or origin: an attempt to transcend physical existence and lay hold of some timeless sphere where change, in particular ageing, does not occur. Alex is concerned with origins and endings. She wonders at the start of her memoirs where to begin and how it will all end. Alex's long walk to the Dobbin's household by the sea is a journey back to some kind of original state. It has been noted that the old couple in their garden are like Stan and Amy Parker.⁷ The Dobbins partake of the same archetypal qualities as the latter pair possess in *The Tree of Man*. Alex's visit is, at once, a return to primal origins and a preview of the end. It enacts the existential dilemma: the anxiety as to a beginning—the plunging in—and the uncertainty about an end, that is seen at the start of the memoirs. Alex writes that "I might have ended in the sea if I hadn't been led to a little white weatherboard cottage looking out over an inlet" (40). The old couple are Alex's "parents," and they live in a state of primal innocence. This section ends with a reference to the loaves Alex had helped Mollie to cook. These are "babies" being "prepared for their holocaust" (51). Here at the end innocence is mixed with horror and anxiety, while birth is juxtaposed to death.

Later Alex is "The Avenging Angel" (67) as she descends on Lady Miriam Surplus's party to wreak havoc. This, along with her roles as Cassiani, the nun/whore, and as Benedict, the nun in drag, faithful companion to the saintly Bernadette, all represent a return to primal states of passion and innocence respectively. The latter two occur in

⁷ Mark Williams, 153.

primitive natural settings reminiscent of her outback sojourn. In the role she plays at the Sand Pit theatre she literally enters the earth as, "the spirit of the land, past, present, and future" (150), being buried in sand on stage. Following her performance in which she emerges prematurely to shout, "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (151), she lines her eyes and becomes, "the great archetypal bird who can face any darkness I'm expected to" (152). Her assumption of the identity of Christ echoes her assertion that "I Am I" (96). In all of these roles it is the performance which is paramount. The archetypal role of the bird is adopted in order to face a darkness. This may refer to death, but it is also the uncertainty of existence and of becoming.

This uncertainty is clearly seen in the transition from role to role. Alex escapes from Nisos "into a formlessness of time and space" (83). As Benedict she is seen amid "the whirling grey, of leaves, mist, smoke and gusts of doubt to which we who have surrendered the will to decide are prone" (111). At the end of her outback tour, as has been noted previously, her fellow actors don't appear to see or recognise her. She wonders: "have I never existed for any of them?" (140) Before her final performance she asks: "Are we beginning? Or have we begun? Most likely we never stopped running through this waking dream of my life What can I do? I am waiting to perform some act expected of me in the context of a play, dream, my own life – whichever" (167). This uncertainty may be seen as a naturalistic portrayal of an old woman slipping ever deeper into senility, but given the context White carefully establishes, it can also be seen as indicative of a generalised existential condition; one which points to the underlying concern of the novel with the tension between being and becoming.

The question of identity is constant and pervasive in White's fiction. It achieves its most prominent position in the last two novels. In *Memoirs of Many in One* Alex's assertion of the "I-I" is an expression of identity as unity, in line with the traditional metaphysical view. In particular, the yearning for redemption, or atonement, (at-one-ment), that is a feature of many of White's characters, is a manifestation of a need for an ultimate identity in unity with the absolute. A concomitant of this is the reduction of the self; indeed, the obliteration of the self. The self is seen as a barrier to the realisation of identity with the infinite. Alex, on a number of occasions, is reduced to

nothing. At the same time, particularly in Alex's case, the self is vigorously asserted. This assertion takes the form, not of single-mindedness, but of multiplication and transformation into multi-faceted being. Alex can transform herself at will into any number of roles; her "range is immense" (89). The motivation behind this appears to be a desire to achieve some kind of salvation. She "must find out whether the lives I have lived amount to anything. I have always been searching" (35). She tells us that serving the repulsive Onouphrios "was a kind of penance which might in time lead to salvation." Thus appears two counter movements; self-obliteration, and self-multiplication. This creates a tension which is revealed in the equivocal manner in which the I-I is invoked.

Thus Alex asks: "Did I I I believe in what I was saying?" (23) Later, in her writing book she records: "I write cross out write cross out again again can I believe that I AM I I must find the Mystic I must find DOG his big spatulate slaverling tongue which may obliterate and redeem" (96). It is significant that the ground of Alex's being here appears not to be herself, but her writing. A sense of self doubt is conveyed in the bush when, in the guise of Benedict, she reflects: "What shall I do? If only I had the authority of Reverend Mother, tic and all, the sanctity of Sister Bernadette. Instead, I am I" (112). Later she says, speaking of the saintly Bernadette: "I am not fit to swing on the hem of her skirt as she shoots like a muslin rocket skywards. I shall remain I – Empress Alexandra of Byzantium Nicaea Smyrna Benha and Sydney Australia" (115-116). In the Sand Pit theatre she meets a former actor and wonders: "was it Craig? Any more than I am I?" (146) What we see here is that the "I" forms no solid ground. Rather than being a constant in a flux of changing scenes and roles, it is the scenes and roles which take the place of a solid ground, and the "I" is determined by the scenes in which it occurs and the roles to which it is attached. Significantly, the "I" is asserted most strongly when it is directly linked to the role of writer, or creator, as in the passages quoted above. In other words, the "I" reads its nature from the scenes and contexts in which it is invoked. It is most strong in the context of the role of writer because it is on the blank page that most control can be realised. The "I" is constructed and: "The central focus of the construction of the

"I" in these *Memoirs* is marked by the placing of the elliptical statement "I am I" in the centre of the *Memoirs* proper, on page 89 of the book."⁸

Alex begins her memoirs with a "plunge" (17). Although she is, in a sense, an omniscient creator, in particular of the roles she herself plays, she is not entirely in control. Not entirely, because her situation is of one in a predicament. She is also, in a sense, constituted by her writing. She enters, through her plunge, a text-world whose ground is the blank page. It is a world under scrutiny, "from inside the house, from the garden, the Park, or most disturbingly, from above." The scrutineers are a mysterious "THEY" who may be "the parasite students and academics who eat out your liver and lights – your *heart*" (164). In other words, those who examine textual worlds. Her predicament is an existential one: of being plunged into the flow of existence, which for her becomes the flow of her writing, without being able to transcend that flow, and see either a beginning or an end. She writes at the outset: "I don't know where to begin what may turn out a monstrous mistake – start at the beginning? Plunge in today? Who knows where the end will come – and whether in a flash, or a long gnawing" (17).

She enters, not a place but a process, and her very identity is tied to this process. At one point she writes:

If only I could nip upstairs . . . and read all I have written about Alex
Demirjian Gray, past, present, and future.
To confirm that I am I.
I " (89).

Her identity is here reduced to an I-point which recalls Kierkegaard's base-line. This is a reduction to a starting point, rather than to any essential self. It is in her writing *as a whole* that her identity subsists and not in the existence of an inviolable core—and not just in her writing as a record of herself, but also in the activity of writing; in writing as process. Her writing is both the narrative flow of this self which is delineated by the movement of this I-point, and the activity by which the I-point is constituted. This flow is not one with any determinable limits. In this it represents existence itself, which is a state of becoming. This indeterminacy is suggested by the image of the

⁸ Ann Nugent, 'The Singular Passion of Patrick White,' *Blast*, 1, 1987, 2.

overflowing writing case which contains her memoirs (9), and the "open suitcase overflowing with letters" (83), which lies beside her after she herself has flowed from Nisos to her home in Sydney.

Later in her memoirs she is confined briefly in an asylum. Here she is placed in a "cube of expanding and contracting light" (174). Her mind is a "churning abyss," and she struggles to sit upright, which is "reason's posture." She writes:

III . . . that's how I began, how I covered all those sheets of paper stashed away . . . in the house above Centennial Park.

I take up the black ball-point and start myself hobbling stumbling along the topmost line of this sheet of white foolscap in my hygienic room. . . I am brought to a full • Perhaps there was never anything there and I only imagined it. . . I could have aborted my ego somewhere back along the line.

Here we see that she *is* what she writes. It is on the *page* that she could have "aborted [her] ego," and it is on the page that she hobbles and stumbles. The black hole on the page which brings her to a halt is the abyss of her mind. The upright posture which she says is characteristic of reason is the upright stroke of the sign—"I." The ground of Alex's world, the ground of this "I," is a tabula rasa. This is apparent in the section of the memoirs which takes place on the island of Nisos. This island appears as it is *drawn* by Alex in the blank margin of the page on which she writes. She enters this scene through an imperceptible passage between writing and thought, and leaves it to enter "a formlessness of time and space" (83). It is connected to the real world as it overlaps with the island "beside the Park"—her house.

On Nisos she is a nun/whore in the service of a grossly sensual monk, Onouphrios. The two have been brought together by the local Abbot, Panaretos, himself a homosexual pederast. In this situation she is reduced to nothing. She writes: "Myself always in the shadows. I was nothing. I *am* nothing" (74). This reduction to nothing is the necessary condition for the transitions of role and locality that Alex undertakes. It is the reduction to the "I," however, this is no Cartesian epistemological bedrock, it is an uncertain "I," uncertain because its identity is tied to the process of existence. Hers is a Kierkegaardian, rather than a Cartesian position. Alex as a Kierkegaardian existent is, like Ellen Roxburgh, in a state of betweenness. Seen in this light the

Nisos episode is representative of existence as such. Wandering this island Alex encounters the Kouros. She wonders whether it has been left there for her or whether it is an emanation of her psyche (77-78). Later, in bed with Onouphrios, she undergoes another transformation, turning into the stone statue itself. The monk in terror screams out, and the scream is "echoed back as an inhuman wail" (80). Later we learn that the Abbot has been murdered, "probably . . . by some of the boys he has misused" (82). Alex is blamed by the superstitious islanders for this mishap and this precipitates her flight into "formlessness" (83).

What lies behind this scene? Alex is responding to words: to signs inscribed on a blank page initially, and here to the word "Kouros." This word means, "boy," and Alex, in becoming the Kouros, becomes, in a sense, a boy. The scream, elicited from Onouphrios in response to his contact with this "boy," is echoed by the dying Panaretos as he is murdered by boys. Language, mind, and world here conflate. The scene is grounded on shifting sand. This sand has the uncertain quality of the sign itself. The metaphysical order of world, mind, and language is here disrupted. The Kouros functions at once: as a word, as a mental object—a psychic emanation—and a realistic feature of an Aegean island. The whole scene has a shifting quality about it. Is it merely the senile imagining of Alex's mind? In the final section of the novel, following Alex's death, Patrick and Hilda visit Nisos and Patrick meets "Cassiani the nun on a damp mountain track at dusk" (185). We are reminded here that Patrick in his Introduction to Alex's memoirs said that "some of the dramatis personae of this Levantine script could be the offspring of my own psyche" (16). The episode also has a theatrical quality, as a theatrical performance extends from the word embodied in the script.

As in the scene with the "miraculous Being," we see that Alex and Patrick are not entirely discrete entities. What lies behind this ambiguity of the self, and of the self as ground or origin of meaning? The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has some intriguing things to say on the subject of meaning and its relationship to the self in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein is here writing against the Fregean distinction between sense and meaning. Frege argues that the meaning of a word is something innate. He calls this the sense of a

word and says that it is independent of the word's reference.⁹ Wittgenstein wants to argue that meaning is not innate or essential. Instead, meaning is imparted operationally to a word through the various ways in which it is used, and the various scenes in which it appears. At one point in the *Philosophical Investigations* (secs. 454-457) Wittgenstein's straight-man says, "everything is already there in." (This is Frege's position.) Wittgenstein then asks, "how does it come about that this arrow ———> points? Doesn't it seem to carry in it something besides itself?" His straight-man replies, "no, not the dead line on paper, only the psychical thing, the meaning can do that." To which Wittgenstein rejoins, "that is both true and false. The arrow points only in the application that a living being makes of it. This pointing is not a hocus-pocus which can be performed only by the soul." He continues:

We want to say: "When we mean something, it's like going up to someone, it's not having a dead picture (of any kind)." We go up to the thing we mean.

"When one means something, it is oneself meaning"; so one is oneself in motion. One is rushing ahead and so cannot also observe oneself rushing ahead. Indeed not.

Yes: meaning something is like going up to someone.

Wittgenstein's model shows us that meaning is an activity, or a kind of motion: an activity or movement in which the self is elided. Meaning operates as extension in space and time. The self is reduced to a point because, in the activity of meaning, the self is unable to be, in Kierkegaard's phrase, subject-object. The self is unable to be both in existence and apart from it. Kierkegaard maintained that the existing individual cannot get outside of existence in order to perceive in a detached way and is thus trapped in subjectivity. Thus we see the predicament of one who has plunged into existence. One cannot move and also observe oneself moving. It is this sense of a loss of self-awareness which occurs in the activity of meaning that we see in Alex's sense of a reduction to nothing, and the ambiguity and uncertainty which surrounds the proclamation of the I-I. The theatrical offers meaning as just such a movement or activity within the stage and script-space. It has, as I have argued, the same ungrounded quality as in Wittgenstein's example.

⁹ Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, (London: Duckworth, 1973), 94-95.

At times Alex appears to be much more sure of herself. During her visit to the Dobbins she reflects that: "Had I been a nun I could have told my beads. I could have meditated if I had been a Buddhist. I could have done almost anything if I had an identity . . . But I hadn't found the frame which fitted me" (49). She follows this observation immediately with: "that's rot of course. I've always become anything I intended to." Later she writes: "I hate myself because I know the inner me. My beauty is a mask, my writing a subterfuge" (57). What is this "inner me?" If her writing is only a "subterfuge" then how can it form any kind of ground? As she suggests in the first quoted passage she does indeed have an identity. It is, however, no identity in particular, rather she adopts any identity she pleases. Identity here is clearly a process and a relation, and most particularly in relation to Alex; a theatrically conceived role, or "frame." As a frame it offers a perceptual structure wherein what is seen is not an in-itself or an as-such, but that which is seen-*as* that which it is.

The question arises as to who controls this process. Immediately following the second passage just quoted Alex describes how: "Once in the night I jumped up and looked at myself. I encountered a ravaged ghoul, member of an order to which I had never belonged in memory, Sisters of the Sacred Blood. It was dripping from my mouth." Alex here is not entirely present to herself. The image that she sees reflected in the mirror points forward to the end of her life and beyond. Patrick, in his epilogue, describes her last moment: "The black skull fell back against the pillows, a trickle of garnet-coloured blood escaping from one corner of the mouth" (183). Later, when Patrick and Hilda tour Europe, they visit the shrine of Santa Chiara in Assisi. The withered corpse in its glass case reminds Patrick of Alex, and he writes that "I would have sworn I could see a thread of garnet-coloured blood trickling from a corner of Santa Chiara's mouth" (189). This connection of image again shows us how Alex's identity is extended beyond herself to include Patrick. The Cartesian self is ruptured as it takes on the quality of a theatrical display. The religious theatre of the displayed saint acts as a metaphor of the theatre of the self.

In the Editor's Introduction Patrick writes: "Independence: the grand illusion to which a trio of incongruously related women – Aliki, Magda, and Alex – were unswervingly dedicated" (16). Patrick, as

editor, plays a role in their creation—they are never independent of him. On the other hand, he is never independent of these characters. He writes, after Alex's death, that it is: "Curious how others pin their expectations on those they have known all their lives without knowing. Only Alex really knew, because she might have created me, and I her" (180). The last word belongs to Alex, as Patrick rather ruefully writes at the end of the epilogue: "If she had become my victim in those endless scribblings which I was faced at last with sorting out, I was hers through her authoritarian bigot of a daughter" (192). The two exist in a continuum of identity, as writers and as gourmets of language. The identity of each subsists in relationship rather than in unity. Each play out their self-roles in the theatre of writing.

It is interesting to note the ways in which Alex appeals to the first person pronoun. The assertion, "I am I," is one which contains the idea that the self is some kind of ultimate reality. Kierkegaard writes: "I am indeed a poor existing spirit like all other human beings, but if in a legitimate and honest way I could be assisted in becoming something extraordinary, the pure *I-I*, I would always be willing to give thanks for the gift and the good deed" (*C.U.P.* 189-190). He goes on to say that: "If the existing person could actually be outside himself, the truth would be something concluded for him. But where is this point? The *I-I* is a mathematical point that does not exist at all" (*C.U.P.* 197). Many characters in White's fiction struggle to transcend their existence: from Himmelfarb in the column of his body, to Ellen Roxburgh in her maze, and Eudoxia in her tower. The struggle to reach the unattainable *I-I* pervades White's work as a recurrent theme. Those characters in the earlier novels seem more ineluctably earth-bound than do the more restlessly protean Eddie Twyborn and Alex Gray. In earlier novels characters such as Voss appear as heroic figures bent in deadly earnest on the quest for transcendence. By the time Alex Gray and Eddie Twyborn arrive on the scene this quest has taken on the quality of a pantomime. The old structures have fallen away to be replaced by a stage-space in which being-as-performance is enacted. The assertion of the *I-I* is seen as an aspect of this performance and as part of the meaning-activity of the protagonist. It is expressive rather than descriptive. It no longer represents any bedrock of reality upon which truths can be established and final answers given.

It is the expression of language; of the sign, as much a self, or selves, that I see in *Memoirs of Many in One*. In this my view diverges from those, such as Antonella Reim, who see this novel as "a sort of 'disguised' autobiography" in which "White comes closer than ever to his 'truer' self, to 'the core of reality.'"¹⁰ What we see is the delineation of a process rather than of an entity which might possess such a core. As Veronica Brady writes: "*Memoirs of Many in One* is perhaps White's most radical work since it signals a refusal to allow words or things to exist in their own right."¹¹ This suggests that White is engaged on a kind of groundless representation similar to the perceptual structures which Foucault outlines in his analysis of Velasquez's painting *Las Meninas*, in his book, *The Order of Things*. Foucault shows how, in this painting, representation comes to represent itself.

Representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation-of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. This very subject-which is the same-has been elided. And representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form.¹²

What this pure form is, is something akin to Heidegger's idea of disclosure: it is Being wherein the subject/object structure is elided. It is this void that White attempts to delineate; a void which precedes any duality or unity. It also precedes any psychological categories. This novel is, in the end, a representation of representation. White gives himself a role in the fiction: that of the "editor" of Alex's "memoirs." We thus are given a theatre of writing in which writing-as-performance is portrayed. Ann Nugent is right when she asserts that "White's fiction of editorship is a literary device."¹³ Just as the artist enters the picture in Velasquez' painting, so in White's novel the

¹⁰ Antonella Reim, 'Autobiography or Fiction? Patrick White's *Memoirs of Many in One*,' *Westerly*, 3 (September, 1991), 95.

¹¹ Veronica Brady, 'Glabrous Shaman or Centennial Park's Very Own Saint? Patrick White's *Apocalypse*,' *Westerly*, 3 (September, 1986), 78.

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 16.

¹³ Ann Nugent, 'Duras and White: *Chaos and Creativity*,' *Blast*, 2 (Winter, 1987), 9.

writer enters the fictive frame, his identity consisting of a theatrical role.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In Harold Pinter's play *The Homecoming* Teddy, a philosopher, explains why his working class family would not appreciate his critical works. He tells them:

You'd be lost. It's nothing to do with the question of intelligence. It's a way of being able to look at the world. It's a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things. I mean it's a question of your capacity to ally the two, to relate the two, to balance the two. To see, to be able to *see*! I'm the one who can see . . . You're just objects. You just . . . move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do. It's the same as I do. But you're lost in it.¹

We see here the tension between being and becoming—of operating "on things" and "in things"—and its relationship to the possibility of seeing "reality," or "truth." Teddy makes a claim for philosophy to be able to see; to escape the condition of embeddedness that characterises Kierkegaard's existing individual. The line of philosophy I bring to White's novels, however, contests this idea. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Derrida all argue against the ability of philosophers to see. It is my contention that White also contests this potential to view the ultimate structures of reality. This is especially true of his last four novels which move determinedly towards a state of increasing ambiguity and uncertainty.

The accompanying increase in the significance of the theatrical is tied to the idea that "since the way things show up – the appearances – just are what those things really *are*, access to what appears just is access to those things."² The theatrical space, in being a site of display, is a metaphor of reality-as-appearance in existence. This leads to the primacy of interpretation over vision and pushes White's fiction in the direction of the post modern. This aspect of White's fiction was there from early in his

¹ Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming* (London: Methuen, 1966), 61-62.

² Charles B. Guignon, 'Introduction,' *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 14.

career. It is implied in his statement in *The Prodigal Son* that he wanted to give his writing qualities which inhered in painting and music, and in his description of his work as "a struggle to create completely fresh forms."³ White's writing became a process where the act and its meaning were the same. In other words, his writing was fundamentally an activity or an expression rather than an instrument designed to describe or indicate the bedrock of reality.

Wittgenstein wrote that "a picture held us captive" (*P.I.* sec. 115). The seductive power of White's pictures—his images—is strong; the absolute seems to reach out to capture us in many of them. Here we see the operation of the image-as-form imposing order on the flux of existence. I have suggested that in White's last four novels another rhetoric of form is operating—the theatrical. This is one of those "fresh forms" that his writing strove to create. Just as the image suggests a unified vision, so too does the theatrical. An image has a seductive unifying force because it is unified in its structure. The imposition of a sense of unity through the image is central to the rhetoric of the image. In the same way the rhetoric of the theatre, which is based on the structure of a becoming within a form which assumes the role of being, operates to allow things to show up *as* that which they are. The ultimate does not, in fact, appear. Like Teddy's family in Pinter's play, characters in White's last novels are "lost" in existence. There is a marked change from the image of the contingent contained within the circles of the absolute in *The Tree of Man* to the openness to the flux suggested at the end of *The Twyborn Affair* and *Memoirs of Many in One*.

It seems to me, indeed the whole thrust of this thesis has been to argue, that White's novels, in particular the last four, work against this notion of finality. These fictions are warped by the tensions operating within them, and cannot offer themselves as clear lenses through which to view the transcendent. White grappled with the problem of reconciling being and becoming. However, he moved away from the modernist attempt to capture the ultimate through the iconic force of the image. More and more his fiction offers ironic, rather than iconic structures which contest this possibility and which see existence itself as the locus of a fullness of life. It is the theatrical mode which I see as crucial in this

³ Alan Lawson, *Patrick White: Selected Writings*, p.271.

process and which operates in the late novels as a metaphor of the containment of this fullness within Being. This mode leads to that quality of ungroundedness which has unsettled some critics and led them to see the final two novels as representing a falling away of White's powers as a writer. However, I see them as being part of his engagement with the question of what it means to be and thus a coherent part of his *oeuvre*.

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